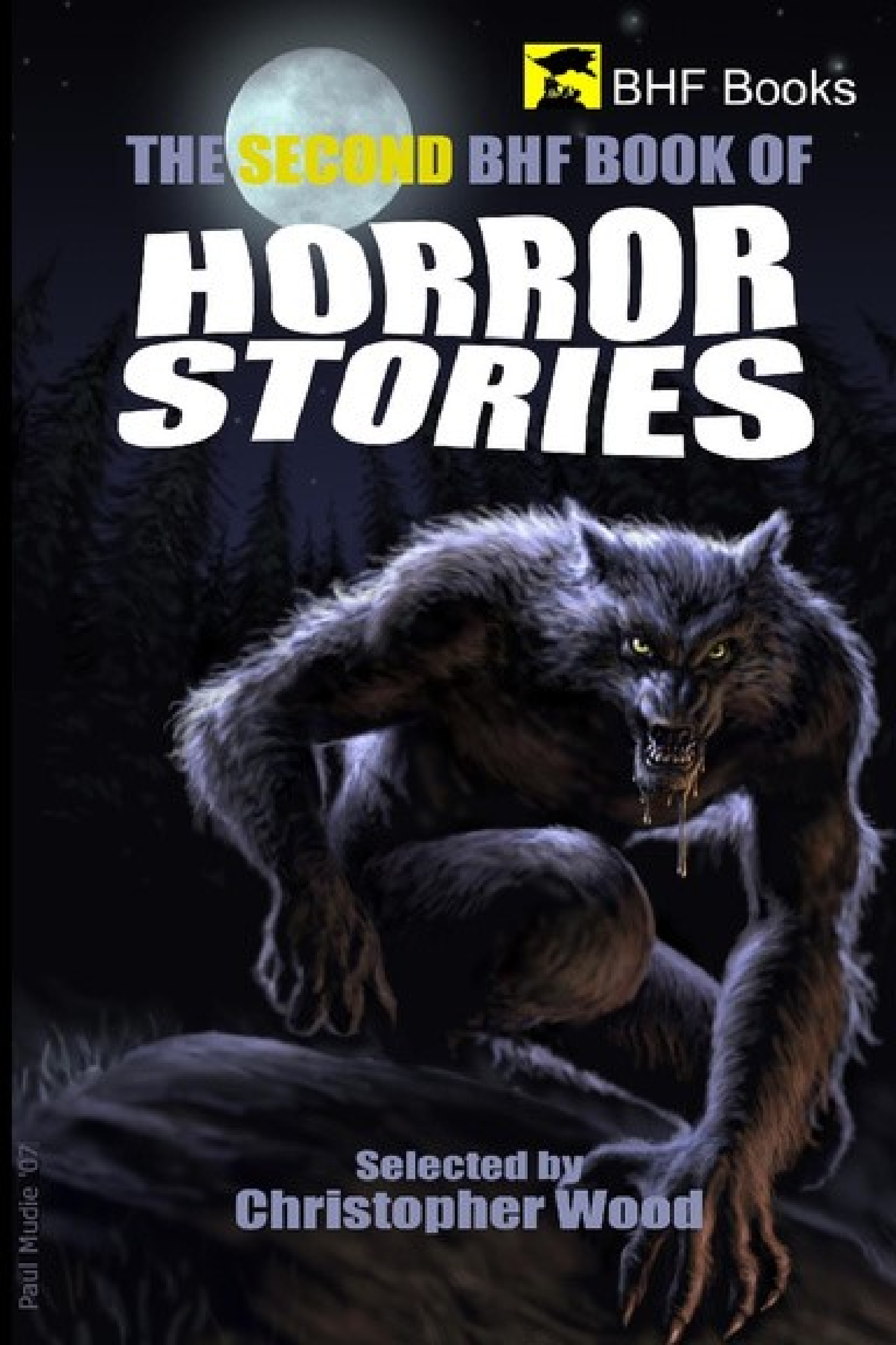
BHF Books

THE SECOND BHF BOOK OF HORROR STORIES



Selected by
Christopher Wood

Paul Mudie '07

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THE FIRST BHF BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

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DEADWEIGHT by E.H. Bourne

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THE SECOND BHF BOOK OF
HORROR STORIES

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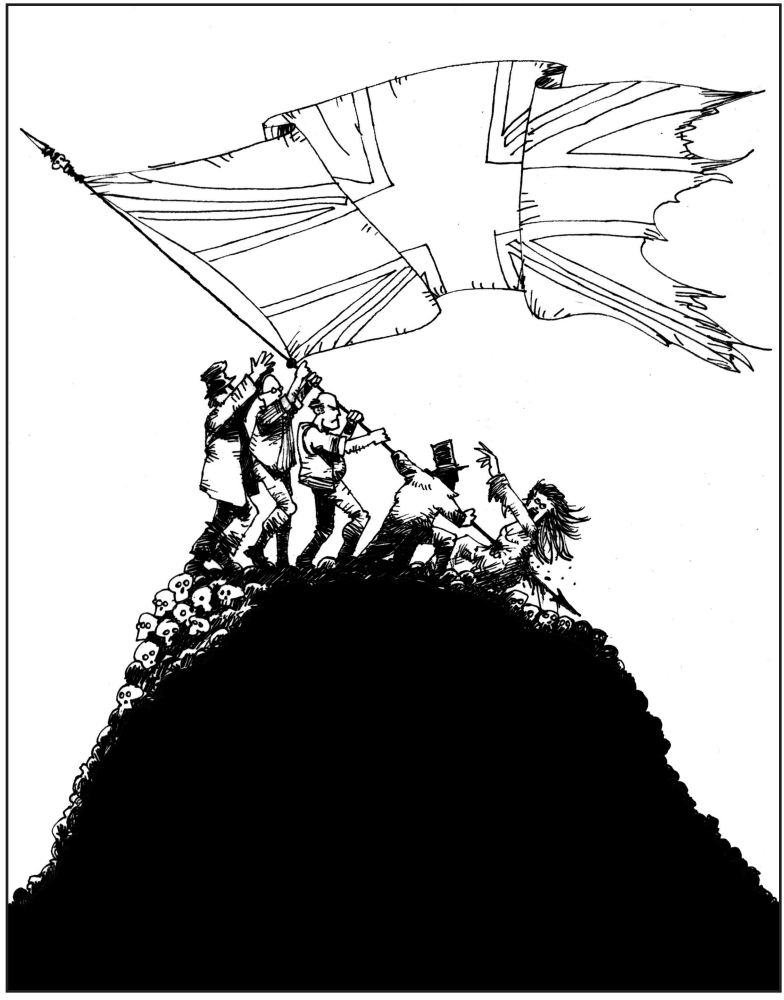

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

When people find out that I run a web site devoted to British horror films, the first thing they do (after backing away slightly) is ask how much money I make out of it.

The answer, I'm afraid, is nothing. Nowt. Zero pence. Or, to put it another way, bugger all. In fact, due to things like server costs and domain name registration, the thing has actually cost me hundreds of pounds since it was set up in summer 2000. And that's not including the cash I've spent on videos and DVDs of what are, in the main, films I'd only ever watch once and would never have even entertained buying if I didn't run the site.

Once I've explained all this, people roll their eyes slightly, call me a dunce (or words to that effect) and go and talk to someone else who, they assume, isn't some social inadequate who spends his evenings listening to death metal and gazing longingly at pictures of Caroline Munro. For the record, I don't listen to death metal, I'm happily married, and horror films are not my entertainment of choice. If they were, would I take the piss out of them so readily? I think not.

The BHF website is a popular site. Very popular indeed. Mainly due to the friendly and (in the main) perfectly normal people who populate its message board, but also due to my reviews and the ever-increasing popularity of the films themselves. Try typing 'horror films' into Google and seeing who appears on the first page

(inspects nails, blows on them and rubs them against front of jumper). But a site just being successful doesn't guarantee that the money's going to roll in. It's a myth that websites are basically a licence to print money. Sadly, no-one believes you when you tell them.

In 2006, I realised that either the website had to start making money, or it had to go. If people were visiting and looking at it, then I could bully them into parting with some cash, surely? I looked into a number of revenue streams and set up a variety of different things on the site. I became an Amazon affiliate, I designed some t-shirts and mousemats, and I flogged a load of the videos I knew I would never watch again on Ebay. The result? Nothing. Nowt. Zero pence. Or, to put it another way, bugger all.

(In fact I did sell quite a few items, but there's little money in these bizarre Internet schemes. And with the advent of DVD, VHS tapes are worth nothing these days).

My other idea was to take some of the short stories which forum users had posted, bung 'em into a book, and publish it through an online publishing service. And so the BHF Book Of Horror was born. The people who use my website were very enthusiastic about this – and not only the writers who I'd contacted to ask if it was okay to nick their stories. A couple of illustrators joined in, and one even supplied a fully-painted cover for me to use (the alternative until that point had been one of my own random scribbles). The upshot of all this was that the first edition of the BHF Book Of Horror was a very professional-looking publication indeed. And no-one was more surprised than me about this.

Because it looked like a 'proper' book, with a nice shiny cover, a contents page and everything, I decided to embark on a big publicity campaign. I contacted all the media outlets in the North West of the UK (which is where I live), conducted many, many interviews with a variety of local newspapers, and my ugly mug appeared all over the place (most embarrassingly, on the front page of the free newspaper which goes to every home in my street). I even had a late night interview on BBC Radio Merseyside, during which I banged on about films like Horror Hospital and Dead Of

Night, and occasionally even the book itself, for night on 40 minutes. And the result of all this hard work and embarrassment? Nothing. Nowt. Zero sales. Or, to put it another way, bugger all.

Actually, that's not strictly true (I just added that last bit for comic effect). The First BHF Book Of Horror may not have set the publishing world on fire, but the publicity I gave it did bring forth a number of new contributors for future editions. Which is why you're holding in your hot sticky hands a book which is quite a bit larger, and even more accomplished, than book one.

For a start, there's 34 tales in this one – that's nearly double the number in the first book. They range in tone from outright horror to scary sci-fi to bizarre comedy (much like the films my website highlights). The new contributors have produced some stunning work, and the people whose work appeared in the last edition have upped their game too, to produce a group of modern stories which any horror anthology would bust a gut to include. And let's not forget the new cover by Paul Mudie, which is simply astonishing.

I said in the introduction to book one that that collection was 'quite wonderful', and I stand by that comment. But this one is better. This one is awesome. This one is… very, very good indeed. And rest assured that in book two, there's no buggering about by yours truly with joke 'printing errors' and unannounced extra stories at the back (talk about shooting yourself in the foot).

And finally, you might be asking when the website itself will shut down, seeing as I've not managed to earn a penny from it. Well, as I was busy making a tit of myself in the local media, someone slipped in through the back door and offered to sponsor it. So that's covered, and the website lives on. Hooray.

Once again, I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed putting it together. It really has been a labour of love, and I can't wait to start on book three.

Christopher Wood
March 2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Emma, same as last time. She hides it well, but I believe the girl might be secretly quite proud of all this nonsense!

Also, to Darrell Buxton, a prince amongst men. One of the first people to really 'get' the BHF site, a font of knowledge, a designer of wicked Christmas cards, and a willing test reader for my inane scribblings.

IN THE PIPELINE

by Paul Newman

The moment he looked pensively in the mouth of the pipeline, Jess knew it had been a mistake to come back. A big mistake. But it was too late now.

He stepped back a few paces and lowered his too-large adult body into the cracked and faded plastic seat of the swing, heels kicking up soft puffs of dust from the dirt hollow worn below as he set it moving. He took an empty pen clip from the top pocket of his suit jacket and dropped it to the ground, loosening his crumpled tie with his other hand.

All around him was the deserted playground, its rusted attractions neglected and keening a lament of creaks and squealing groans beneath the wet slate sky. Atrophied weeds had dedicated the years to breaking through the packed dirt surface and in victory smothered flaking metal legs and foundations in a choking embrace. A low, chill breeze sighed from the direction of the drab housing estate to catch up the last dead leaves of autumn. He hunched his shoulders against the darkening world and buried his aching hands deeper into his pockets.

And before him gaped the mouth of the pipeline.

(*dare you*)

set blandly into the side of a steeply rising grassed bank overgrown with nettles and briars

(*double dare*)

which ended above with the strip of a metal barrier and the droning sweep of traffic heading out of town, drivers eager for the chocolate-box promise of home.

The pipe opening was cluttered with dull shards of shattered glass, yellowed and brittle newspaper, generations of litter and dirt piled like dry bones at the lair of a dragon. The light penetrated about three feet within before giving up the struggled and submitting to the darkness. Jess knew the pipe ran for about 150 yards, with a shallow curve towards the middle from where it was possible to see the circle of light that was the exit.

It would take a child about two minutes to get from one end to the other, crouching through the enveloping pitch with his knees a bare inch from the ground, head scuffing along the top and chin tucked in tight

(*triple dare you!*).

About two minutes. Almost a full 90 seconds longer than it had taken him to suck in a final look at the home and hearth he had shared with Christine and their three children, from where he had plotted and daydreamed his way up the shining corporate ladder, and to blandly digest what he had done there.

In the winter months, the pipeline served to drain off the heavy rains washing from the gutters above. But every summer, since the beginning of forever, it was transformed from a nondescript piece of urban infrastructure into The Dare. There was status aplenty to be reaped from sneaking through the tangled garden of ancient Mrs Myers at the lower end of Arkwright Road to breathlessly relieve her few gnarled apple trees of their withered fruits, or by scaling the crumbling stone of St Anthony's to reach the vacant window at the top of the derelict church's tower.

But this was The Dare and well it deserved its upper case status for those who had braved it to emerge blinking at the far end, dodging the traffic as they scooted back across the ring road.

Except Richard hadn't come out.

On a hot and dusty summer afternoon a lifetime ago, he had crouched down with a cocky smile a little like a sneer on his lips to

scuttle into the pipeline and out of existence. In the history book he wrote only in his head, Jess has since titled the day *When Richard Went Into The Pipeline*, filed between *What We Will Do On Our Holidays* and *Back To School*.

A whoop of laughter cut through the turmoil in his head, memories clicking into place like fruit machine reels.

'Higher! Higher, you useless Joey!' Richard laughed, his upturned, ecstatic face swept by the sun.

It was all Jess could do to leap out of the way and avoid his friend's backswing before catching the lip of the seat with the very tips of his fingers to give it as mighty a forward shove as his meagre leverage would allow. The swing took Richard out to the point where the seat bucked crazily, rusting chains snapped, and it seemed he must fall.

'Bombs away!' Just as the swing began its downwards journey, Richard gave a salmon's wriggle and slipped from the seat. For a shining instant he hung on the air as if poised to take flight, his face haloed in a shock of yellow hair, before dropping to the ground with a slap of worn plimsolls and a hoot as the air was knocked out of him. Rolling away to avoid his returning ride, he picked himself up grinning before inspecting a red graze across the knuckles of his left hand and dismissing it.

'Your turn.'

Jess stuffed his hands into the pockets of his faded old jeans and turned away towards the roundabout.

'Oh, no you don't, Ryan!' And Richard was on his back in one fluid movement, bearing him to the dirt with his greater weight and a merciless rib-pummelling until a satisfactory number of pleas has been forced from the panting victim. Smiling and gasping, the pair staggered to the roundabout, lay on their backs and watched a slowly circling sky sparsely populated with impossibly white clouds. Jess turned on one side and squinted at the far-off houses under construction, their spiky garlands of scaffolding shimmering in the heat haze. Richard chuckled to himself and, as Jess glanced over, gave a conspiratorial wink.

'Dare you.'

Jess sat up huffily and ignored him as the roundabout slowed to a crawl. It dragged reluctantly through a final revolution and left him facing the yawning invitation of the pipeline, framed by the swings.

'Round and round and round she goes, but where she stops ...'

'Fuck off, Dick.'

'Whoa, Ryan, that's fighting talk. Call me Dick again and pay for it with your life – death by a thousand rib jabs!'

'No way. We'll be late in and I'll cop it from Mum if tea gets cold, and ...'

'So?'

'Forget it. It's probably soaking in there and I'll really get wrong if I go back covered in shit.' The taste of his recently acquired taboo vocabulary was growing more familiar by the day to his eleven-year-old mouth. Just for the practice, he tacked on another 'fuck off'.

Richard bugged out his eyes in mock horror, lips pinched in a prim parody of his mother's frequent disapproval. 'Oh, come on, don't be so boring. It hasn't rained for a week now – or are you just turning chicken on me, Ryan?'

'Course not!'

'So let's do it. Next week it's back to school, 'cept you'll be going to the Grammar and I'll be at the Cheyne Grange yob factory with the rest of the dickheads.'

A moment's reflection. 'Do you want all your snotty new mates to know what a cowardly yellowshit chicken you really are, deep down inside?'

'Hey, that's not fair!'

'Who said anything about fair? Double dare you!'

Richard hopped up into a crouch, knees under his chin, hand tucked into his armpits and elbows waggling wildly up and down. 'Bwaaauuuuu-b'k-b'k-b'k. Bwaaaauuuuuuu-b'k-b'k-b'k!'

Jess snorted despite himself. 'D'you really think I'm going to cave just because you do shitty chicken noises?'

And so he gave in and they sauntered over to the pipeline, its chipped concrete lip blunt and worn beneath a ragged fringe of

grass. A distant skylark's song was drowned out by the passing roar of a bright lorry above, glinting in the hard light and spitting up a cloud of grit and fumes.

'What's the matter, scared of a few ickle rats?' Richard dropped from the sweetly patronising aunt's tone into his deepest, most ominous voice. 'They get pretty big in there about this time of year, what with all the nice fat, juicy kids who get stuck on the way through.'

'Fuck you, Dick. And I am *not* fat.'

'Or is it the Trash Man?'

The pipeline had been there as long as memory and had always been The Dare. Long before the planners took out their erasers and wiped the old part of the town clean off the map to replace it with the rabbit warren of the new estates, long before even the playground. There had always been the pipeline.

And it had always been home to the Trash Man.

Unwittingly callous parents used him to scare children from playing in the pipe, their own childhood fears of him moving just below the calm surface like glass-eyed predatory sharks. But they couldn't keep him in the pipe, and by night he crawled out to lurk in a hundred cupboards, under a thousand beds as their helpless occupants cowered and whimpered in terror.

By day, he lived in waking dreams in the dark of the pipe, always just further than the sunlight could reach, draped in dark, filthy rags, his huge spade hands encrusted with grime. And the flaking, dried blood of children. His gnarled fingers were twisted like tree roots, tipped with warped and jagged talons for nails. A festering mane of snarled hair hung to his waist, merging seamlessly into a greasy matted beard. His face was a wet mass of open, weeping sores, framing pale, hungry eyes like dim headlamps. And his mouth …

Instead of teeth, his bloodied and mottled gums sported inch-long shards of razor-keen glass winkling through ropes of saliva. Mostly, he fed on the trash blown down from the road. Mostly.

The braver children who took on the challenge of the pipeline sometimes claimed to have caught a whiff of his rancid breath in

the deepest recesses. The summer before, Billy Trenton swore blind he had actually felt the creature's ragged claws snatch at the back of his anorak as he scrambled out towards the light, proudly showing a new tear in the back of the garment. But then, Billy Trenton's bragging was near-legendary in itself.

'Cut it out, that's baby stuff – there's no such thing as the Trash Man,' spluttered Jess.

Richard saw his chance and swooped. 'Then what's stopping you?

'Triple dare you.'

Jess struggled for an argument that wasn't coming. He knew he was forced to surrender; that, or suffer his friend's merciless taunts for the rest of the summer and, most likely, beyond. 'Okay, but you first.'

Richard hesitated for just an instant before turning with a flourish of bravado to duck down and peer into the pipe. Blackness stretched away into nothing. He glanced up with an uneasy grin.

'I suppose there's a first time for everything, but you'd better be here when I get back.'

'What do you mean, a first …?'

But Richard was gone. Jess heard the faint scuffling and an awkward giggle. Then silence. He went on his knees to look in, careful not to get too close in case

(*it bites*)

he cut himself on the glass and old cans. He couldn't make out a thing, not even a suggestion of movement, although he fancied he heard the faint stir of disturbed debris. The sun burned steadily on the back of his neck, yet a trickling of cold sweat broke through the pores of his forehead and upper lip. The air was utterly still and lifeless, a sweltering deadweight. Only the rush of passing cars overhead reached him. He checked his cheap Timex and judged about three minutes had passed.

'Richard!'

Nothing. He yelled out again but heard only the muffled echo of his own voice bouncing back. Bracing his hands on the entrance, he craned inside. The traffic noise was cut off instantly and in the

new stillness he thought he heard a low scuffling just like the sound

(*a rat makes*)

of dry paper rustling on concrete

(*don't even start to think it*)

or like cloth brushing along concrete,

(*him?*)

like something big and stealthy moving towards him, preceded by the sewer stench of ripe meat and excrement

(*oh my god it's him it's him and he's coming and Richard's dead and please oh please oh please don't let him*)

and a low panting as it stopped and held itself just inches away in its veil of darkness.

Jess screamed, wrenching himself away to land on his backside with a painful thud. The stinging in his buttocks spurred hot tears, blurring his vision into a sunlit green canvas with a gaping black vacancy punched through its centre.

Above, a coach thundered by in a spill of loose stone chippings. Grimacing back the thin bile in his throat, Jess darted away from the pipeline and at a safe distance attacked the bank and scrabbled to the top until he had both hands on the crash barrier. Leaning into the buffeting gusts from passing cars, he strained to see over the road and into the miserable pastureland on the other side. A fouled brook threaded its way through the rank grass and weeds before disappearing into the cover of trees half-a-mile distant. But there was no sign of Richard. If this was some stupid game, a trick he had yet again fallen for, then … But no, he knew it was no game.

He slid down into the playground, panicking and careless of the green stains left on the seat of his jeans and his elbows. Jess clambered onto the roundabout, hugging himself with his knees drawn up close, and rocked in an agony of fear and frustration. The dark hole never left his sight for a moment, taunting, mocking him.

He stayed that way until lilac twilight and deepening shadows drove him away, heading back to the estate and his furious mother in a steady flood of snot and tears.

Raindrops spattering his face snatched Jess back. The hot dust

of that summer had settled more than a quarter of a century ago but his could still taste the grit in his teeth. And some things never settled.

Nothing much had changed in the years he had been gone. Nothing fundamental. The family had moved away when his concerned, confused parents could no longer stand his nightmares. The sprawling estate had spread its drab boundaries ever further in a jetsam of neo-brutalist cubism and, subsequently, mock-Tudor hutches for the aspirational, but had only succeeding in looking even more wretched and tired than he could have imagined possible. Strangely smaller as well. Everything seemed much smaller.

Except the pipeline, which screwed him down into the battered training shoes of the eleven-year-old he couldn't escape and could never be again.

Twenty-seven years earlier he had arrived home and fled sobbing to his room. It wasn't until two policemen in their stiff navy-blue uniforms and too-pale faces knocked at the door late that night that his frantic parents found out why.

Richard.

A shocked salesman of double-glazing on his way home from a frustrating and worthless day had found the shattered body, crumpled at the side of the Wilford Road, above the playground. A hit and run. The life had been hammered from Richard's slender body, leaving a bloody tire track deep through his chest.

The Evening Post had carried the story on its front page the following day, draping it around an indistinct and grainy photo of police officers and their carelessly parked vehicles surrounding a distorted white outline on the road. A stained plimsoll lay on its side in the foreground, laces spilling out from under it. Jess was not mentioned by name.

In the days that followed, soft-voiced officials had spoken to him while his parents impotently wrung their hands and paced in the background. It took many days more before Jess could haltingly tell the story of *When Richard Went Into The Pipeline*. They figured out the rest for themselves, that the boy had gone through to the other side and was run down trying to cross the road on the way

back. An appeal was launched for witnesses in a bid to find the driver responsible. When school restarted, head teacher Brian Morton held a one-minute silence in morning assembly before launching into a sermon concerning the dangers of playing near roads. Not that anyone needed telling. In the playground at break time, Jess faced a legion of eyes both accusing and curious until he could stand it no longer and stayed alone in the classroom.

The driver was never found and Jess knew with certainty he never would be. Because a small voice inside told him the Trash Man had got to Richard long before any car could, and had flung his torn body onto the road when he was done with it.

The light rain died away but Jess could hear a distant grumble of thunder from the bruised sky and smelt the tang of heavier downpours on the way.

With no home behind him and no hope before, he struggled for the words to articulate the futile rage, loss and despair welling up within. And what was that, nudging away at his vitals like a tumour patiently blooming in the dark? Was that guilt?

'Fuck it.'

Uninspired but honest, it would have to do. He hunkered down into the mouth of the pipeline and sniffed. The musty decay, damp and urine odours of his childhood met his quivering nostrils and provoked a wrinkle of distaste. But there was something else. It was like a

(*welcome?*)

warning, urging him to

(*enter*)

take to his heels and run until exhaustion claimed him. The pipe was as dark as he remembered it, striking him with a gripe of wet fear, prickling his scalp and breeding a plague of fluttering insects in his stomach. He stood to leave the dismal playground

(*triple dare you*)

and found himself rooted. With the first tears brimming, he stooped and crawled into the darkness. The tight squeeze snapped him back elastically into his adult body.

'This is so stupid. So very fucking stupid.' The shadows

around him had no reply, waited impassively. Jess crawled on with the back of his head, shoulders and thighs chaffing along the rough walls, making sixty garbage-strewn yards when a sharp pain in his left hand lanced a yell from him. His reflexes tried to carry him up but succeeded only in driving him awkwardly around the curve of the pipe and onto his side. He held up his hand and felt a viscous wetness tickling down his wrist from the heel of his palm. Feeling blindly, he closed on a sliver of glass but could get no purchase on it. Nipping with his incisors, he tugged it free and spat at the taste.

'That's it, that's about it! Fuck it, fuck you and fuck everything!' He went to turn about and shuffle out the way he had come. Which was when he found he couldn't move. His bulk made it impossible to writhe around in the confined space, leaving only the option of crawling out backwards over the piled trash. Or going on. His twisted his head around and could dimly make out the gloomy circle of faded evening a long way off. With the back of his hand he smeared the slick grime already cloying his forehead and pressed on. His injury smarted and he wondered vaguely just what the hell he was supposed to be doing, what he was trying to achieve, to prove; an overweight, redundant grey man of business chasing through a cramped pipeline after a half-formed intention from his childhood he had been too scared to follow even then, when possibilities seemed endless and despair was a blank on the map.

He snorted caustically in self-contempt. And close, very close, something stirred in the dark.

Jess held his breath and his thudding heart held it with him. His eyes ached from straining to see. He whined, softly. The motion came again, this time closer still. He looked around, but even the distant grey of the entrance was gone. The vile stench, briefly forgotten, now bubbled up all around and

(*it's him it's him it's him it's him it's him it's him it's*)

a wracking sob of desperation grew like a poisonous child in his belly, its malformed hands tugging at his vocal chords to birth a scream, and he smelled

(*Mum's Chanel No 5 embrace as she hugged him close to*

soothe away his nightfears)

the moist corpse-breath cold on his face and tasted

(*the harsh juniper as the first cold gin slid down in the packed winebar, flushed with his promotion*)

an acid tang of terror searing deep in his throat and heard

(*Christine's uncomprehending pleas for him to stay*)

the sharp scrape of glass shards grinding against one another and felt

(*the limitless vacancy within*)

knotted arms clutch around him in an unbreakable grip.

And as he struggled, chill, crusted lips mashed against his own, a wet tongue probing. And Jess found his scream, unleashing it in a long desolate howl no-one would hear.

***

Dawn's watery light was more than five hours gone when it first moved in the pipeline.

The suit it had once worn was unrecognizable, wreathing it in tattered remnants of pinstripe and faux silk. It was hungry. It raised one filthy paw to its mouth and flinched at the pain it found there. The gums still bled freely from their sharp new occupants, embedded deep and gleaming in the thin illumination, and its disfigured tongue bathed in the copper taste with an emotion akin to rapture. It was hungry. A shoe was missing from its left foot and it tore off the other to hurl it into the damp trash.

A sudden noise caught its attention and it peered slyly through clotted eyes to the distant circle of day. A small pair of legs dropped into view and it slobbered in anticipation, jaw slack and blissful. It was dark in the pipe but the Trash Man was not afraid.

He was home. And home felt good.

SHOW HOME

by Paul Adams

I'm pleased you could make it. Not many people get this sort of opportunity, you see. You read about it all the time, don't you? – But that's after the event. After it's all been done and examined and reported on and then it's yesterday's news. Or history to a person like you. History in the making, that's just what it is. I mean, to be in actually at the start, to see it right before the event. I don't think that's ever been done before, do you?

Right along here, this is where it'll be. We're cracking on as you can see. I mean time's money isn't it? There were a few objections but the country needs housing doesn't it? All these new homes need to be built, so many tens of thousands each year and they've got to be built somewhere. Planning permission was just a formality and before you know it we've got the roads in, the drains and all that. It looked liked the Somme for a few weeks while we were coming out of the ground, what with all the rain and the mud but once the concrete was in it's been full speed ahead.

Modest little development really, a mixture of houses and maisonettes, flats like. Affordable as well. Built for people to live in, none of this investors' buy to rent crap. Real people living in their own houses. Real homes. This is the main road where most of the flats are, and then you've got the closes with the houses, two and three bedroom mostly but there are some four beds at the far

end. This is our one – Brazil Close. Remember that name; it'll be famous one day. Notorious should I say. Like them others, Rillington Place and that one in Gloucester, what was it, Cromwell Street?

Most of these are finished now – that's why I said come and see it now because it's sure to go quickly. Just along here. Look's a bit bare at the moment but once the plants are in and they've laid the grass it'll look a lot better. All with driveways see – space for two cars, that comes as standard. Built to a high specification but sold at an affordable price. That's what Head Office says. Going to be the sales pitch for next year on all the adverts but remember you heard it here first!

Here we are, number nine. Nice little three-bed semi. Doesn't look anything out of the ordinary at the moment but you wait and see. That front door will be a familiar site on the news one day – you know, the standard shot they show on the TV with the police-man standing on guard. Mind how you go here, they're still laying the paving. Not a bad size front garden is it? This whole area here will be covered up with one of those tent things for a while mind you while they do the forensic stuff. Got the key, one moment and – here we are.

Slightly narrow hallway but what you need to look out for here is the stairs, especially the spindles on the handrail. That one - one, two three in from the newel post. She grabbed on to that as she fell trying to get away, cracked it and left quite a large amount of blood on it too. And the post itself, a sizeable bloody handprint on the top and then a big wide streak up the wall as well as she leant against it and used it for support while staggering upstairs. The front door was locked you see – no way out. He planned it that way. Very clever.

Let's go along the hall here. There'll be some blood on the floor but not as much as upstairs believe me. They were more than flesh wounds though, the first blows I mean, and she was bleeding quite heavily by the time she made it to the first floor.

Now, the front room. This was where the main argument took place after he came home although for a short time it did spill over

into the kitchen. We'll can see the kitchen on the way through to the garden. No real action there but he did go through into the garage when he made his way out. Bloody handprints on the door handles and marks on the walls again – her blood, not his - as by this time he was pretty well saturated with it. Well, I'm not surprised after what went on upstairs.

Right, you've got to imagine this with furniture in. They've just finished plastering in here so it's a bit bare. Now, the fireplace is here obviously and she was standing about there where you are when he came at her for the first time. He was quick – well she didn't expect it. Had it behind his back and then it's swinging through the air. 4lb club hammer. Got it from B&Q that afternoon. The first swipe would have killed her if she hadn't managed to move back. Caught her jaw though and shattered the left side. Began bleeding profusely almost at once and there were a few teeth gone as well.

She went flying, back against the gas fire – imitation coal effect but top of the range specification – and then came down in front of the sofa which will be along there. And that's when he hit her again, the second blow that missed her head but caught her arm, breaking it easily. Quite a bit of blood by now on the rug and the sofa cushions. What happened next is a bit of a mystery as you would have thought he could have finished her there but he didn't. She managed to get up and out the door but he came after her.

Her only thought was to get upstairs. That's where their daughter was you see. Sophie. Only fourteen. She must have known he meant to kill them both. Seen enough in here? Right, back along the hall and then we'll go upstairs.

I mentioned the blood on the wall didn't I? She got to the bend in the stairs here and must have been screaming to Sophie to lock the bedroom door but she didn't get further than the second step from the top. That was when he caught up with her, pulled her down and finished the job. At least nine blows to the head so the pathologist said. Terrible mess. The stair carpet was saturated in blood and it soaked through the underlay into the wood. Lots of skull fragments and brain tissue by that door post there and quite a

bit went up the walls, there and over there. Some on the ceiling as well. That door is the bathroom by the way.

After that he went through into the bedroom just along here. They've started painting up here as you can see. Sophie must have looked up when he came in and, well. How he could have done that to her I don't know. She hadn't heard anything you see. Was listening to a Walkman – they don't call them that these days do they? One of those MP3 players, had headphones anyway whatever it was. Hadn't heard her mother trying to warn her. The bed was along there and he used the hammer again naturally. Even worse than her mother, that wall mainly but of course the bed caught most of it. After that he went downstairs.

Quite something to contemplate isn't it? All that rage and terror, all contained within these four walls. Or will be. There's one or two snagging items to finish off in here and then this room will be done.

Right, if you're done up here we can go downstairs and through to the garage. That's where it all ended so to speak. It's an integral garage with a utility room off the kitchen. Good size both of them. He went in, locked the door after him. The car was already there, an Astra. Mark Four. I used to have a Mark Three a while back but they've changed them completely since then. He threw the hammer down into that corner. The second block up – there – was chipped and there were quite a few large spots of blood generally on the concrete floor from his clothing as he moved about. He had the hose prepared and the newspapers to stuff around the window once he'd got it fixed up to the exhaust. Got in, started her up and that was it.

So now, you've seen it all. Number 9, Brazil Close. Quite a notorious address that will be in a few years to come. These murders are two a penny nowadays aren't they? But what with him being an MP and all that. That's the thing which makes this one a cut above the rest, especially as he went for all that 'man of the people stuff' and living on an estate like this rather than in some gated community behind ten foot high brick walls. Well, you don't expect it from someone like that, do you?

Neighbours found them, smelt the car fumes coming out of the garage like. Must've had a shock looking through the letterbox and seeing all that blood going up the wall. Could just see her legs as well at the top of the stairs. Like I said, lot of mess but they cleaned it up, stripped it all out and tried to sell it again but these places get a reputation don't they? It was empty for some time, year and a half I think before it was sold and that was only after they changed the name of the road. Like 10 Rillington Place. They changed that to Ruston Close before it was finally knocked down. Barnfield Mews was what they'll call this but the old one won't be forgotten, that's for sure. You'll be able to look it up on the Internet and find it easy. And it won't be long before we sell this one either. Nice discount on the show home always brings in a quick sale.

Well, seen enough now, have you? Don't feel as though I'm rushing you. Feel free to take a tour round on your own if there's anything you want to see again. Like I said before – it's not very often you get the opportunity to see these things before they happen, is it?

I'll just turn the light off in here and I'll meet you out the front. Like I said, take your time, there's no rush.

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ROMERO AND JULIETTE

by Gareth Hopkins

Editorial Note: You're going to think this isn't a horror story. You're wrong.

It might be fair to say that George Romero is a pretty dull sort of guy. His wardrobe is mostly grey. Not his actual wardrobe – although come to mention it, his wardrobe is grey – but the clothes filling it. They're all grey. Except for the odd beige jumper or T-shirt that he saves for the times when he really wants to make an impression. Even his socks are grey and when he's sitting down or crossing his legs, his grey trousers pull up and reveal his grey socks as well as a fair amount of shin.

Of course, George Romero's dullness does not reign itself in at his wardrobe. Everything about George is dull. Even his hair doesn't shine, no matter how much light you wanted to shine down onto it, George's hair would remain as flat as a fart in a two-dimensional drawing. His whole appearance is entirely uninspiring. He's like some old actor out of some old black and white film, someone who kept all the colour that a black and white film could give him, but long ago jettisoned the charisma that most of those actors had. George Romero doesn't mind being dull. He hasn't got the imagination to imagine being any other way.

There are perhaps only two interesting things about George

Romero. No, three, but we'll get to the third later. The first of these interesting things is his job. George Romero is a research scientist, something that actually is more exciting than it sounds. The second is his pet frog, which he's named Perseus. George found Perseus a long time ago, living in an empty plant pot in his back garden. Perseus is just your common or garden frog, except for the fact that after years of being well fed by George, he's grown to an above average size. Everywhere that George goes, Perseus goes too. George has even had a special portable holding tank built for him. It's made out of clear Perspex and even has a little running wheel in it that Perseus has never yet used. This one little incongruity on George's part is more than enough to make him the object of massive amounts of ridicule from his work-mates. Indeed, there's a very popular series of cartoons that are e-mailed around the offices detailing the ongoing adventures of George Romero and his secret identity, Frog Man, who battles zombies in his spare time and always makes sure that he gets to bed before eleven.

The real kicker is that these cartoons are all drawn by the head of human resources.

George, perhaps mercifully handicapped by his lack of imagination, doesn't even have the slightest inkling that he's the star of a small print-run comic-book that's actually starting to attract a small amount of publishing interest. He just comes into work every day, Perseus under his arm and he gives everyone a small wave and a professional smile and he goes to work in his laboratory.

George's work, as mentioned above, is also quite interesting. Even when he was a child – and slightly more interesting – George had a certain talent for chemistry. He spent many an hour as a teenager engineering small explosions and was even known, in his wild youth, to plant small explosives under his teachers' chairs that would explode when they sat down. These explosions always went down a storm and his proficiency at making small bombs out of ordinary household chemicals was probably the only thing that stopped him getting bullied to suicide when he was in high school. Even then, he had a penchant for grey clothing. Nowadays, George's work has moved on from small explosions. Nowadays,

he's working on finding a new stimulant to replace caffeine – with all its addictive properties – in soft drinks. Alright, it's not exactly Oppenheimer and the Bomb, but there is something, stimulating, if you'll excuse the pun, about work that involves feeding barbiturates to rats and then watching them race around mazes. So far, George has had little problem finding a chemical to stimulate the rats, it's the whole addictive part that he's having problems with. And there's also the habit that the rats have, after taking his stimulant, of keeling over and bursting their hearts into shards. Still, that's part of the fun of science and even though George doesn't really understand the principle of fun, he supposes that he does have fun doing his work. Of course, that's got a lot to do with Juliette.

Juliette is the third interesting about George Romero. I suppose that it's kind of unfair to lump Juliette in with George, like she's a part of him; like I'm saying that women are really just an extension of men. I'm not saying that, before any feminists start getting their indignant heads on. But Juliette is part of George's life, and not just because she's his research assistant, but also because, for some reason that no one else seems quite capable of fathoming, she's actually sleeping with George. And they really are a mismatched couple. George with his neutral colour scheme doesn't really clash with Juliette's colourful, bohemian look – it's pretty difficult for beige to clash with anything – they're just…incongruous. To use the metaphor of the black and white film again, seeing them together, side by side, is like having half your TV with the contrast turned down, and the other half with the contrast, brightness and volume turned all the way up. That kind of thing, I'm sure you'll agree, would be difficult to look at – it might even give you a headache – and such is the case with George and Juliette. They're difficult to look at. Just…mismatched. And it's even worse, because not only is Juliette bright to George's pale, she's beautiful to George's plain, too. Of course, George knows how lucky he is just to have landed a girl like Juliette, but at the same time, now that he has landed her, he kind of takes her for granted. Such is the curse of such an uninspiring person: he just can't imagine ever los-

ing Juliette now that she's in his life. George is a big believer in constants.

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On the day our story starts, things are going as per usual. George has been in the lab since seven-o-clock, trying a different mix of barbiturates and caffeine and some other mystery chemicals that might have names, but which I can't be bothered to provide for you. As usual, Perseus has been placed on the side beside the sinks. Over the last few days, he's been behaving very oddly, becoming quite sluggish – George hasn't figured out that he's forgotten to feed Perseus for the last week or so – and slothful. Now, he's lying in a shallow pool of water and just watching water drip from the end of one of the taps as George is using a pipette to add a small amount of Mystery Chemical #1 to the tincture he's created.

'Morning, George,' Juliette says.

George looks up at Juliette as she comes in and removes her coat, hangs it on the rack by the door and puts on her white lab coat. 'Morning, Juliette. Did you sleep well?' Even though George and Juliette are an item, they rarely spend the whole of a night together. For his part, George can't sleep amidst the – as he sees it – decadently colourful surroundings of Juliette's bedroom.

'Yes,' Juliette says. 'How's the compound coming?'

'I'm just adding a different amount of Mystery Chemical #1,' George says. 'The kettle's not long since boiled if you want a brew.'

Juliette makes herself a drink. As she waits for it to stew, she peers in at Perseus. He swivels a lazy eye up towards her and croaks half-heartedly. 'What's with Perce?' she asks as she pours milk into her tea.

George shrugs, grabs a clean pipette and the bottle of Mystery Chemical #2. 'He's been sluggish for a while now. I think he's just getting old. My grandad was exactly the same when he got old. Never moved a muscle unless he had to.' George finishes up adding the chemicals, makes a careful note of exactly what ingredients

he's added and in what quantities and then he stands up and stretches his spine. 'We never even realised he was dead until we found out that he hadn't even got up to pay the papers. He always paid his papers on time. Turned out he'd been sat in the house, in his armchair for at least a week. Everyone just thought he was taking a very long nap.'

'Didn't he smell?' Juliette asks.

'Yes, but we thought he'd shit himself.' This is not a joke on George's part, even though Juliette takes it as such and laughs. 'Are you ready?' George asks. Juliette nods, puts down her cup of tea and then comes to help George run series thirty-seven of his ongoing experiments.

They've hardly starting adding two drops of the tincture to each plate of rat food when the thumping begins.

'Is that you?' George asks, looking down his nose at Juliette. She does have a somewhat troubling habit of tapping her fingers along to music or some inner rhythm when she's bored.

'No,' Juliette says. 'Maybe it's the air-con.' The air-conditioning in Zelch pharmaceuticals is notoriously rickety.

'I doubt it,' George says, 'I haven't switched it on.' He looks around the lab, but the thumping has stopped. He might suppose it's a passing truck thumping by on the by-pass if he had the imagination to consider such a possibility, or he really cared. 'Oh well,' he says, bending back to his work. He squeezes another couple of drops of tincture onto the rat food, moves onto the next plate and the thumping starts again. 'Oh, what the f…flipping heck is that?' he asks as he squeezes too hard and empties the entire contents of a pipette onto the plate of meat. He stares around and this time, the thumping continues long enough for him to spot the source.

'Oh…God,' Juliette says, like George staring towards Perseus's tank. Even as they watch, Perseus once again launches himself at the side of the tank, leaving a bloody impression on the plastic. Both George and Juliette, at a loss for exactly what to do, just stand and stare as Perseus once again readies himself to leap. Before he can jump, Juliette makes a move towards him, but it's too late: Perseus jumps and this time hits the glass hard enough to

tip the already teetering tank over the edge of balance and off the edge of the side. Juliette runs over, George hot on her heels. They stand over the remains of the tank, the plastic now spider-webbed from the impact with the floor. The shallow pool of water that was in the bottom of the tank is leaking out, rippled with spirals of blood. From inside, there are weak flopping sounds. Together, as one, George and Juliette kneel down – George careful not to kneel in any water. They peer into the tank. Perseus, in one final bid for freedom, leaps out and they both pull their heads back. Perseus lands with a snap on the floor and then lies there, completely still. His head is slightly caved in; his eyes are glassy. He doesn't blink as George prods him in the head with the tip of the pipette. A little of the tincture runs out of the tip of pipette and – if you can believe it – trickles down Perseus's skin and into his mouth. For a few seconds, Juliette and George can only stare at the tiny little broken and amphibious body.

'Well, he's dead,' George says at last. He stands up. 'Throw him in the bin.'

Juliette looks up at him. 'Don't you want to…bury him?'

George stares down at her, looking puzzled. 'Why?' he asks.

'He was your pet!' Juliette says. 'Didn't he mean anything to you?'

George stares down at the body, then shrugs. 'He's just a frog,' he says. His lack of imagination has really stopped him growing any kind of attachment to the frog, as it has done anything else. He might believe in constants, but he also believes in change. 'Now are you coming back to work?'

'I'm going to bury him,' Juliette says. George turns around and watches as she scoops the body up off the floor. 'And if you're not bothered, I'll do it myself. I've got plenty of spare shoeboxes at home.' Juliette stands, puts the frog down on the draining board and then hunts out a plastic bag, places his body in it before striding over to the coat rack, removing her lab coat and putting her coat back on. She slips the body into her coat pocket. 'It's the least he deserves,' she says and then she strides out of the lab, slamming the door behind her.

George considers going after her, but he honestly can't even fathom why she's so pissed off. If he'd never picked the frog up out of his back garden, it wouldn't have had a funeral when it died. Completely unaware that he's just seen Juliette alive for the last time, George turns back to his rat food and continues to put drops of the tincture onto the meat.

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Juliette doesn't turn up for work the next day. Nor does she ring in sick.

This doesn't really surprise George. Last night he tried to phone her a couple of times, but he only got the answer phone and he supposes that she's been screening her calls. Obviously, his lack of sensitivity pissed her off more than he thought.

What does surprise George is that the board of directors for Zelch Pharmaceuticals moves George's six month review forward. The next day – Juliette still hasn't turned up or called in sick and even George, supremely unimaginative as he is, is starting to fear this is something worse than a lovers' tiff or an extended period of mourning for a dead pet – he heads up to the boardroom and gives a short presentation. He tells the board of directors that he has made little progress with his research, although on the plus side, the rat problem that used to trouble Zelch has all but disappeared. He doesn't have to wait long to be given the sack.

George is not surprised. His coldly analytical brain picked up the signs of trouble as soon as the review date was moved forward.

He's always been too honest for his own good.

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On his way home, he decides to stop off at Juliette's house. On the drive home, it's suddenly dawned on him that he actually does care about her and he wants to make sure that she's okay, even if all he gets is the cold shoulder. Besides, he really ought to let her know that she hasn't got a job anymore.

He parks in the driveway and then walks up to her front door. He does have a key, but he knocks first. It's only polite. After roughly five minutes waiting outside and knocking every thirty seconds or so, George hunts out the front door key and lets himself in.

The house is cold and it smells funny: stale, somehow. 'Juliette!' he shouts. There's no noise. Nothing except for a soft inhalation sound and something like the sound of someone making a croaking sound in their throat: hruk-hruk-hruk. George makes a quick tour of the bottom floor of the house, but doesn't find anything out of the ordinary except for the fact that most of the light bulbs have been smashed. At last, he returns to the landing and turns on the lights to illuminate the path up the stairs. From up above somewhere, there's a sound like hissing and a quick scrabbling sound.

'Juliette!' George calls. These odd sounds and the eerie stillness of the house are not enough to unsettle George. He has never feared the darkness; never imagined that it's anything other than darkness. He starts to ascend the stairs, taking them one step at a time so that he doesn't trip or something. At the top of the stairs, he stops and listens. Silence. Almost. But from Juliette's bedroom, there is a sound: slow, subtle, but still audible: breathing.

'Juliette?' George asks. There's a creeping, icy feeling in his gut. It takes him a while to identify it, because it's not something he's used to, but eventually, he does recognise it: the slow, bubbling melting pot of fear. Still, that pot is only simmering at the moment and despite his grey appearance, George is made of sterner stuff than it might appear to an outsider. He pushes open the bedroom door and switches on the light.

Juliette is sitting huddled against the radiator on the other side of the bed. She's got the side of her face pressed against the radiator, so George can only see her in profile and most of her body is hidden by the bulk of the bed. Her skin is pallid, almost luminous. She really doesn't look well.

'It's really good to see you, Juliette,' George says. He starts to smile and then he remembers his secondary reason for coming round here. 'Listen, I know you're not really in any state to hear

this, but it's best you hear it sooner rather than later. Especially since you're ill. They've shut us down. We've lost our jobs.' Juliette just stares at him blankly. 'I know, I know, now's not the time. I just thought I should tell you because…I mean, the company health plan isn't going to pay out if you've got anything…contagious or anything.' George tries on a smile. It doesn't fit that badly.

Juliette blinks a couple of times. 'Lost my finger,' she says at last and then pushes herself up out of her slumped position next to the radiator. Aside from an open shirt, she's completely naked but there's nothing arousing about the sight. As she turns to face him, she holds her arm out and George sees that she's missing considerably more than just a finger. Her entire hand is gone. A few shafts of fungal-grey bone are sticking out of the stump.

``Jesus…' George says, taking a step away despite himself. 'Who did that to you?'

'That fucking FROG!' Juliette roars. She shambles forward a few steps, then stumbles and falls onto the bed.

'I'll get whoever did this to you,' George says, taking a step towards her and sitting down on the edge of the bed. He brushes a strand of hair off her cheek.

Juliette bites at his finger, her mouth clamping shut on the spot where, not a second before, his hand had been.

'Gargh!' she says and then spits one of her teeth onto his forehead. 'Nurk!'

George backs away to what he considers a safe distance before picking the tooth off his forehead and dropping it off the floor. On the bed, Juliette flops over onto her back. Her breasts jiggle with the movement. The whole sight might be sexy if it weren't for the fact that there's a large chunk – including the nipple – missing from her left breast and her pubic thatch is crawling with maggots.

'Is there something wrong?' George asks, backing away a little further until he's back out on the landing. 'We can talk.'

'I just want someone to hold me,' Juliette says and her voice is sexy, even if her body isn't. 'Come to bed, George.'

George considers for a few seconds. 'Erm…No,' he says at

last. 'I think I'll stay here.'

'I knew you were only with me for my looks,' Juliette says, a sulky expression crossing her face.

'Look,' George says, finally losing a little patience, 'just what the hell is wrong with you, woman?'

'Wrong?' Juliette asks and titters. 'Wrong?' her voice rises in pitch, she shakes the stump of her arm at him. 'There's nothing wrong, Romero. Why ever would you think there was anything wrong?' She pauses and smacks her lips a couple of times, staring at him hungrily. 'I just want someone to hold me, George,' she says again, her voice once more alluring. 'I'm just so cold.'

George stares at her, weighing all the evidence with his eminently scientific mind. He looks at her sagging face, her pale skin the colour of curdled milk. She does keep shivering. Then he thinks of her attempting to bite his hand and spitting a tooth onto his forehead. He clears his throat.

'I think I'll stay here,' he says.

'Gargh! Your mother sucks cocks in hell!' Juliette snarls. 'Nurk! She doesn't even charge for it!' Juliette roars laughter and then starts snorting like a pig.

George just shakes his head. What an eccentric performance, he thinks.

'MERRIN!' Juliette bellows, her voice echoing around the otherwise silent house.

'Now look here,' George says, finally laying his hands on a bit of backbone and taking a few steps towards her, 'what's going on, Juliette?'

Juliette sighs and slumps a little bit. She stares at him slanted from underneath her drooping brow. 'I'm dead, arsehole. Jesus.'

'Dead? I don't-'

'Your fucking zombie frog, George. He bit my hand off and infected me, didn't he?'

'Zombie frog?'

Juliette rubs her eyes. There's an odd squelching sound and when she looks at George again, her right eye has deflated and is leaking yellowish pus. 'Do I really have to play Basil fucking

Exposition? You're the bastard scientist aren't you? Can't you figure it out?'

George thinks for a minute or so. At last, he shrugs. 'Sorry,' he says. He doesn't have the imagination to put data that doesn't come in chemical symbols together.

Juliette takes a deep breath. 'Alright,' she says, 'I'll put the pieces together then, shall I? Your mystery stimulant tincture thing is poison to living things, yes? We know that from the piles of rat carcasses we sent to the incinerator, right?'

George nods. 'Yes,' he adds.

'But we didn't test it on a carcass, did we? Why would we right?'

'Okay.'

'But then when your fucking frog died, you prodded it with a pipette that had just a convenient little bit of stimulant on it and somehow, that little bit got into the frog's system, yes?'

'Right.'

Juliette nods, spits another tooth out. It lands a few feet from George's feet. George stares down at it. When he looks back at Juliette, she's slithered off the bed and is now lying on the floor staring at him intently. When George backs out onto the landing again, she looks disappointed. 'Urh…' she growls.

'So what happened to the frog?' George asks.

'For Christ's sake, George, how dense are you? I mean is it any wonder you got fired? You couldn't research your way out of a wet paper bag could you? Your mystery serum was so strong that it killed living things, yeah? But it was just strong enough to bring the dead back to life. You created the chemical equivalent of a voodoo witch. I suppose they might give you the Nobel Prize or something.'

'Wow!' George says, going misty-eyed for a few seconds. One of his only fantasies involves being handed the Nobel Prize for chemistry.

This time, when he looks back at her, Juliette has managed to crawl close enough to grab onto the toe of his work boot. There's a long line of saliva worming its way out of her mouth.

George backs up until he meets the guard rail at the top of the stairs.

He clears his throat and pulls at his collar. 'So…so you're dead then?'

Juliette nods and licks her lips. 'Wanna check my pulse?' she asks, exposing her neck towards him.

'And, uh, you got like the because of-'

'That fucking FROG!' Juliette screams. She slams her hand into the carpet and there's a dull snapping sound as one of her fingers gives. 'It's still in the house somewhere George and if I get my hand on it I'll…' she trails off when she realises that George has taken advantage of the fact that she's so distracted and made a break for it. By now, he's most of the way down the stairs. 'Hey,' she shouts, crawling along the landing carpet and peering around the newel post at the top as George reaches the bottom step. 'I only want a nibble, George. Just a toe, maybe a couple of fingers. You wouldn't even notice…'

George backs away, clawing for the handle for the front door. He watches as Juliette pulls herself up at the top of the stairs and leaning against the banister starts to struggle down towards him. Deciding that enough is enough, George turns tail and runs, unfortunately, not realising his proximity to the door, he slams right into it and knocks himself over. He lies still for a few seconds, just listening to Juliette's slow but inexorable progress towards him. Close to, he hears that hruk-hruk-hruk sound that he heard when he first entered the house.

'That fucking FROG!' Juliette shouts and then there's a loud tumbling, thumping sound. George pushes himself up with a limberness that he had forgotten he possessed. Juliette hasn't even reached the bottom of the stairs, tumbling in her tight little ball and making odd grunting noises with each impact, before he's on his feet, scrambling for the door handle and throwing himself out into the cold darkness of the night.

He sits in his car with the engine running for about five minutes, waiting for Juliette to follow him out – although he doesn't really have a plan for what he'll do if she does – but she doesn't

appear. Maybe zombies can't work door handles, he thinks before putting the car into gear and backing out of her driveway. That, at least, would be a relief.

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Later, lying in bed and watching headlights play across the curtains in his grey bedroom, George considers the developments of the day. For a while, he wonders whether he should call the police and tell them about finding Juliette. He decides not to. George Romero might be a lot of things, but crazy he isn't. For one to be truly crazy, one needs at least a modicum of imagination. First off, the cops wouldn't believe a story about zombies and secondly, they'd probably arrest him for murder or something. Nevertheless, George has no problem accepting Juliette's version of things. He may have a decrepit, shriveled up imagination, but he at least has an open mind and he long since accepted the principle that there is no end to the miracle of modern science and what it can achieve. He even considers taking the serum back to Zelch and maybe showing them its reanimating properties, but he doubts they'd take him up on it and hire him back on board. After all, what are the commercial prospects for creating a shit load of zombies?

Then again, he thinks – and he smiles at this – maybe the military would be interested. At least zombies don't have a union.

He rolls over and closes his eyes. If this was a story, he thinks, then I suppose we'd all be in trouble. Juliette might be dead, but that frog's still out there. It could infect hundreds, maybe thousands before it got run over. There'd be a whole army of zombies to overthrow the living. The military definitely wouldn't like that…

His mind could continue, but George doesn't like this line of thinking. It shows too much imagination. He flips a switch in his mind and throws this newly blooming artistic side into darkness.

Within five minutes, George Romero has slipped into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Somewhere, in the darkness of George Romero's bedroom, a frog begins to croak.

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THE BLOOD FIELD

by Derek Johnston

This happened a couple of years ago, when I was taking a holiday with a friend in north Norfolk. We'd gone for a ramble, wandering the public footpaths between fields, breathing the fresh air and forgetting about our daily strife.

The problem with these walks is that you really have to concentrate on your feet. You're so busy making sure that you aren't about to tread in a rabbit hole or slip into a waterway or ditch that you don't really have time to look up and take in the scenery. And the paths are so narrow that you can only really go single file, so talking is fairly minimal except when you get the chance to stop and rest. In fact, it's rather hypnotic, with the rustling of the reeds and long grasses in the breeze, and the constant focus on that narrow bit of ground right in front of you, and no conversation or landmarks to distract you.

Which must have been how we got lost. Martin was supposed to be keeping track of where we were. He had the map and he was in front. But I can understand how it happened, and I could joke about it when he stopped and turned to me.

'Have we already walked down this bit?' he asked.

I teased him a bit about being the one with the map, the one who was supposed to know where we were going. But when I saw that he really was looking upset, I left off.

'It all looks much the same to me,' I admitted. 'I don't think I've looked up in about an hour. If we keep on going, we're bound to find a path or a sign or a road, or just a clear bit where we can get our bearings. Come on.'

Martin nodded, although he didn't look certain, and we carried on.

I was now making an effort to look out for things that I could recognise, in case we were somehow going around in circles. I even took my eyes off the pathway for a bit to look around. The sky was hazy and overcast, and there were no real shadows and no real sign of the sun to give us any hint of direction. And the pathway was bounded on both sides by fields of reeds, their sharp leaves swaying and hissing in the breeze. I returned my gaze to my feet and trudged onwards.

I don't know how long it was until Martin stopped again, but by now I was beginning to be worried as well. The light seemed to have faded further, but there was still no clear indication of what time it was.

'I swear that we've walked this bit before!'

'How can you tell? Everything looks the same! Besides, if we were walking around and around the same field, wouldn't we pass the way that we came in? And we've not passed anything!

'Look, let's grab a rest, have something to eat and drink and then carry on. We'll feel better and more clear headed then.'

So we sat on the narrow path and ate. But I couldn't help looking up at the sky, which seemed darker still, and listening to the breeze cutting through the reeds' sharp leaves, stronger than before. I think that Martin felt it too, because, without saying a word, we both hurried through our snack, gathered our things and started up again.

We were hurrying along the path now, but still careful of where we put our feet. The reeds were beginning to thrash more strongly now in the wind, brushing our faces with the spears of their leaves. We went faster, eager not to face a storm out in the fields.

Martin was pushing on ahead of me, and we were constantly

brushing aside the reaching reeds from our faces, when he suddenly gave a cry and stopped short. I almost stumbled into him, but managed to keep myself upright. He turned, a hand raised to his face and a look of shock in his eyes. He took his hand away and looked at it, then looked at me.

There was a long thin cut on his cheek, as if it had been sliced neatly by a blade. Blood welled from it as I watched.

'It cut me,' was all he said.

'You just ran into a sharp stem,' I told him. 'They're thrashing about so in the wind that…'

'*What* wind?!' he interrupted, and pointed back and up, to the tops of a stand of trees just visible above the tall spears of the reeds.

They weren't moving.

Not even a leaf was fluttering against the darkening sky.

But neither of us had long to contemplate this, as the thrashing of the reeds grew stronger yet, reaching out for us on the path that men had carved out of their field. I yelped as the thrashing leaves cut at my hand, leaving bloody trails across its back. Spears slashed at my face, my eyes, and then we were running.

Careless of roots and hollows, we careered along the path, determined to find some way out of this nightmare. We stumbled, faltered, but always returned to our pell-mell flight. And the reeds lashed at us, slashed at us, and we cried out again and again in inarticulate protest at this attack.

But still there was no sign of a path out of the field.

And I think that that's what broke Martin, because he suddenly cried, 'I can't stand this! There's no way out!'

And he plunged from the path, into the reeds. They closed around him almost instantly. And he started screaming. And screaming. And the rustling grew stronger.

I had automatically reached out to stop Martin when he ran into the reeds, but had pulled back when the blades had cut painfully into my face and arms. Then I realised that I was being lashed less. Intentionally or not, he had drawn attention from me. And, in the instinctual cowardice of self-preservation, I left him, and ran for my own life.

His screams followed me along the path, stifled by my sobs of shame and terror. And then I noticed the pathway, branching off the one that we had been on, heading off through the reed field but, amazingly, with trees visible at the other end. I ran down it, cut by the reed blades, and stumbled out into the darkness under the trees, where I fell face down on the musty earth.

At some point, the screaming had stopped.

Eventually, I found the strength to lift my aching body from the ground, and stagger away dazedly. I found a pub, and called the police, and told them what had happened. They searched for Martin, but found nothing, or so they told me. They questioned me, even, but I had nothing to gain from his murder, so they told me that they would treat it as a disappearance, that he was probably on the run from something. Maybe he had debts, or troubles of some sort, had gone crazy and attacked me, explaining the cuts that I had suffered, and run away himself. Maybe. Ultimately, they let me go, telling me that they would let me know if they found anything.

Just this last year, I heard that the fields in that area had been cleared for some construction work. In one field, they found bones, human bones and animal bones, complete skeletons. The most recent were Martin's. But the oldest were hundreds of years old.

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THE MORRIS MEN

by Franklin Marsh

Billy sipped his warm beer and wondered how the flaming hell he'd got into this mess. He looked around him. Everyone else seemed to be having a good time. The sun was shining. The beer bellies were assembling a little unsteadily for the tug o' war. Some gormless idiot of a teacher tried hard to smile as a wet sponge caught him bang! - right in the kisser. Dawn and the kids would be around somewhere. It was a little while since he'd stalked off to the beer tent to avoid their 'Dad! Can I have 50p/a pound/another go.' The Little Dampton 'carnival'. It would have been a 'fete' when he was little. Still the same tawdry, parochial, tatty , pathetic little shambles. Same bunting, same marquees, same fools, same bloody tombola prizes. He'd actually won a bottle of wine at the last one he'd been dragged to. Got it home and the cork crumbled. It was so sour he could have put it on his chips.

Another swig. Much longer and he'd start to get angry. A curious jingling reached his ears. What on earth…?

Ten scarecrows walked into view. Big but somehow decaying men. Once white clothes, with frayed red rags attached. Great big black boots. Smooth, small wooden poles in their hands. Jingling bells attached to their legs. Crumpled dark hats with straw hair dangling underneath. Faces blacked up (in this day and age!). It could

have been anybody. Even his mates. Not that he saw them much these days. They split up and formed into two lines of five facing each other, occupying the grass in front of Billy. A faint smell of something rotting reached him.

The men raised their sticks, and hit the stick of the man opposite. They began to prance, each mirroring the movement of the other, sticks clicking in a strange rhythm.

Bloody Morris Dancers! Billy was stunned. If there was anything that represented his beloved country so much, but that he detested, it was these stupid cretins! His Union Jack and Cross Of St George tattoos glowed. His thoughts turned to those lads fighting abroad. Not just the ones sent home from Germany, but the boys in the desert too. This wasn't English, he didn't care what anyone said.

He sipped his beer and continued watching. Mothers and children paused to observe the queer display. The children didn't seem to like what they saw, and were soon tugging at mum's hands to move on. An elderly gent and his granddaughter, both hot in St Johns Ambulance regalia, were the only other stalwarts.

The dancers remained stone-faced and unsweating, despite the mild frenzy of the dance, which came to an abrupt halt. Oblivious to everything around them, they once more formed into two rows of five and began to march past Billy and the mini-medical team, The vicar and his wife, both studying sheets of paper were moving closer.

'I didn't book them, Dorothy. Did you?'

'Nothing to do with me Edmund, I assure you.'

A little imp of mischief welled up inside Billy. As the last man strode past him, he stuck out his foot. The scarecrow tumbled, and hit his head on a large round tent peg. The sound of a snapping tree branch, and the man's head lolled at an unnatural angle.

Billy froze in shock. He suddenly felt sick. He hadn't meant….

Four of the men picked up their wounded comrade, and marched on. Two marched in front, another two behind. The largest of the ten paused to inspect their passing, then took up the rear.

The elderly gent had started forward, then paused. His granddaughter clung to his arm. The vicar and his wife had gasped at the sound of the snap, but they too remained rooted to the spot.

Just before the strange procession entered the woods at the edge of the field, the large man, turned to look back. At Billy. Who felt his throat constrict. He was sweating, and breathing quickly.

All of a sudden, the pint glass in his hand shattered.

'Ow! Fu…….dge.' He exclaimed. This seemed to bring the others back to earth. The St Johns pair dived into their bags for embrocation, witchhazel and bandages.

'Are you all right, young man?' enquired the vicar's wife, with a sharp edge to her voice.

'Fine,' glowered Billy, holding out his hand for the oldster to examine.

He glanced towards the woods. The men had disappeared. He sighed with relief and his body sagged.

After his wound was cleaned and his hand bound up, he found a seat.

'Dad, Dad! We've been on the bouncy castle!'

'And the Helter Skelter! Can we have…'

Billy ignored the children and stood up to snatch his wife's handbag.

Her broad smile disappeared with shock. The kids fell silent.

Billy opened the bag, removed the purse and dropped the bag. He opened the purse, removed the notes and dropped the purse.

'See you later….maybe.'

He glared at Dawn and stalked away.

'Billy!' she hissed looking around in embarrassment. That was the trouble with living in a small village. Everybody knew you and your business. Amanda began to cry.

'It's alright, Mand. Daddy's just had too much to drink. He'll be okay later.'

She bent down to retrieve her handbag and purse.

Sean watched his father walking away. He was fighting back tears, a blend of love and hate fighting for supremacy in his face.

Billy entered the pub, ordered a pint and a scotch tersely but politely, then retreated to an empty table. He drank his way slowly and steadily through Dawn's housekeeping, staying silent. Mostly based at the table, occasional forays to the bar and the Gents.

The landlord kept a weather eye on him. That was the trouble with these new folk moving into the village. You didn't know them. They could be anybody. He didn't like the look of this one.Hoped he wouldn't kick up come closing time. You never knew. Old Jock Doobie was more Dixon Of Dock Green than Jack Regan. He wouldn't be much help.

'Last orders!' Sally the barmaid rang the bell and glanced at Billy. He looked a rough 'un, but a bit tasty. She wondered…..

To her and the Landlord's surprise Billy seemed to wake from a trance. He looked around the pub, picked up his empties, returned them to the bar, and left with a quiet 'Thanks. Good night.'

The Landlord breathed a grateful sigh of relief, and a disappointed Sally wondered just what might have been…

To Billy's surprise, it was dark outside. Bloody hell, what was wrong with him? He'd ruined Dawn and the kids' day. How could he apologise? He heard a faint jingling behind him. He whipped around, ready for anything. Except an empty street. He moved on, heart pounding. Those bastard Morris Men had really spooked him. Get a grip, William!

As he passed the graveyard by the church, he saw a flash of white. There they were! Well, two of 'em. Just standing there. He didn't want to confront them, and decided to hurry on.

Shit! Two more. In front. And two across the road!

The jingling from behind him. He turned very slowly. This time they *were* there. Another two. He was standing by the gate. A wooden stave floated towards him and rested on his shoulder, behind his neck. The large scarecrow stepped forward, and used the stick to guide Billy into the graveyard.

Billy tried to resist but couldn't. A spurt of liquid ran down his leg. The Morris Men encircled him and began to dance. He fell to his knees, and looked up in supplication. Nine sticks descended

with amazing force.

CRACK!

Dawn jacknifed awake. What the….? She reached for Billy's side of the bed. Cold. Empty. The bastard! Which slag's bed had he ended up in? She'd begun to believe those days were over. That's why they'd moved to the village. She slumped back against the pillows. They were supposed to be taking the kids to the funfair on the common. Even Billy was looking forward to it – although he'd never admit it. What could she tell them when they came running in and asked where he was?

***

Jocelyn and Elysia sipped their Pimms and looked at the wonderful red sunset reflected in the canal. She leaned back against him. He smiled to himself, and quietly hummed 'Tonight's The Night'. A faint jingling had her sitting up.

'What's that? Oh, look, Joss, how fabulously random! It's some Morris Dancers!'

Jocelyn sighed as the ten bulky but somehow decaying figures marched into view. He weighed the glass in his hand. What an odd bunch. Faces blacked up like that. It could be the chaps from the rugby club on a jape.

The ten scarecrows split and formed into two rows of five facing one another. The men raised their sticks, and hit the stick of the man opposite. They began to prance, each mirroring the movement of the other, sticks clicking in a strange rhythm.

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THE STONE FOUNTAIN

By Billy Turner

Frank was pulled from his sleep and almost immediately he knew why; his bladder was ready for bursting. He propped himself up on his elbow and squinted at the alarm clock. Through the blurred red glow coming from the display he could make out two figures – a four and a three. Four-thirty in the morning? He sighed, pushed himself up from the mattress and felt his way blindly across the room, out onto and across the landing and into the bathroom. Outside the frosted window above the toilet, the wind and rain battered furiously against the frame and glass. The man urinated and the flow was heavy, almost drowning out the noise of the fierce weather outside. He shook, flushed and stepped over to the sink to fill himself a glass of water. As he drank he stared hard into the mirror facing him.

For many years Frank had wondered what it would be like to stare into the eyes of a killer, and now he knew. As far as he could tell, his eyes were no different to anyone else's. In fact, as far as he were concerned, they were dark and rather warm with not even a hint of evil.

His first victim had been taken three nights previously. A fifty-four year old woman who had fallen on hard times. Frank knew her age, even her name, because they had chatted at length before he'd decided to throttle her. It had been on a Sunday evening – a partic-

ularly cold Sunday evening.

Before leaving the house that night, Frank had paced the living room, psyching himself, preparing for the one thing he'd dreamed and fantasised about so many times before, and when he was ready, he'd pulled on his thick coat and stepped out into the cold, dark night.

Frank paced the deserted streets for a good half hour that night before heading for the local park gardens. The gardens were one of his favourite places - completely enclosed, once you'd entered the heart of the place, by a wall of closely set fir trees that towered forty feet into the air. He sat down on a bench facing the little stone fountain that he'd watched so many times before. It was a simple two-tier affair – the top saucer spilling its water over and into the bigger one below, before that in turn overflowed into the ground basin.

His attention was drawn away from the fountain just then, by the lonely, dark figure coming his way. Frank quickly scoured the rest of the gardens and saw that they were the only two in the immediate area. The figure, bulky with clothes, made it's way slowly along the path towards him until it reached a waste bin on the verge of the grass and stopped to root through its contents. Finding nothing, it continued on its way until it finally reached the bench where Frank was sitting, and to his surprise, sat down beside him. The figure coughed and pulled out a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of its coat.

Frank watched the bundle of clothes and only now, as such close quarters, was he able to determine its sex. The small hands and tiny face hidden behind the layers of scarves told him it was a woman. She coughed again and turned to Frank.

'I don't suppose you happen to have a light, do you?'

The eloquence of the woman's voice took Frank so by surprise that he didn't even respond to the question.

'Never mind,' she said after a moment, 'I'm sure I've some matches somewhere.' She delved deep into several different pockets, the still-unlit cigarette clasped between her lips. 'Ah, here we go,' she said eventually and pulled out a box of matches that she

shook at Frank. 'Told you so.' The woman lit her cigarette and tossed the dead match at her feet. 'I'd offer you one, dear, but God only knows when I can get my hands on some more. I only managed to get these because I happened across some silly fool a few nights ago who'd passed out in a bus shelter. A young slip of a girl she was, heaven knows what she'd been drinking, but she was holding an unopened pack of cigarettes and, well, she wasn't going to miss them was she? Probably won't even remember buying them.

Frank still hadn't spoken and the place fell silent again as the woman concentrated on her precious cigarette. But the silence was only temporary.

'So what are you doing out on a night like this?' She took another drag. 'I'm damn sure I wouldn't be … if I had the choice, that is.'

'Just a bit restless, that's all,' Frank managed. 'It can get a little monotonous staring at the same four walls night after night.'

'Can it?' she said. 'Think yourself lucky. I had four walls once. Four very grand walls… more than four, in fact, if you include all twelve bedrooms.' Her last few words were accompanied by a sardonic chuckle.

For the next hour or so, Frank listened to the woman's tale.

Her name was Margaret, she was fifty-four years old, and had, for a good section of her life at least, been extremely wealthy. She had travelled extensively, not to destinations littered with package deal tourists, but to far off, uncharted places like remotest India and Thailand. She'd even navigated the Amazon River with a family of natives.

But eight years prior to her husband's death, they had split, and not harmoniously. The length of time between their parting and his death allowed him to completely alter his Will and divorce her. At the time of his death, she was left with practically nothing.

The cause of their divorce, Margaret claimed, was due, in part at least, to her husband's disapproval and dislike of the artefacts she insisted on bringing back from her expeditions. Harmless mementoes, odd-looking souvenirs she insisted, but her husband

hated them, said they made his skin crawl, and that they were at the core of nearly every row they had.

'I used to annoy him with them,' she laughed. She was on the last few drags of her forth cigarette by now. 'Whenever he went off on one of his rants I used to wave the rabbit's foot at him and tell him I'd put a spell on him.' She fell silent again and her head dropped as the memories washed away into the cold night. 'Do you want to see what I have left?' she said solemnly. 'What my only possession from that past life is?' Without waiting for an answer she tossed the cigarette butt into the air and dug deep through the several layers of coats and cardigans before withdrawing something from one of the pockets. She opened her hand and proffered the object for Frank's inspection. Frank didn't take it from her, and instead choose to study it from where it sat, in the palm of her hand.

It was a monkey, delicately carved from dark wood and made into a brooch. The animal sat in a squat position, and from head to toe Frank guessed it measured four inches, maybe more. The intricacies of the carving were quite clear under the light from the nearby lamp. It fascinated him, so much so that he couldn't help but slowly reach out his hand and trace the monkey's tail with his index finger, as it followed the contours of the creature's back and ended in a shallow, curved hook behind the head.

The woman closed her hand around the brooch and buried it back beneath her layers of clothing. 'It's my good luck charm,' she said, without any hint of irony.

And it was that statement that reminded Frank why he'd ventured out on such a night in the first place.

He rose to his feet and took several deep breaths of the cold night air as he prepared himself. Then, without any more hesitation, he stepped behind the bench and took hold of the woman in a head lock. She tried to scream but the scarves and woolly hats she wore to keep out the cold betrayed her by acting as a muffler. Frank yanked her violently from the bench and dragged her backwards into the deep shadows of the fir trees. He dropped her onto the wet grass before straddling her squirming torso and fighting through the bundle of scarves until his hands touched her naked neck. His fin-

gers gripped like a vice around the flesh and as he bared down with all his weight, his head began to quiver with the effort. Saliva found its way between his gritted teeth and fell onto the woman's face, which was now contorted into a unrecognisable mask of terror and pain. For what seemed like several minutes she bucked and kicked like a wild mule until her struggles finally began to weaken. Every new attempt to escape from her killer was more feeble than the last. Eventually she lay still. Frank held his grip for a few moments longer until a rush, the like of which he's never experienced in his life, surged through every fibre of his body. He fell sideways from the lifeless bulk and onto his own back, panting and trembling as though in the throes of some bizarre orgasm.

But he couldn't afford to hang around long. He gathered himself together and strolled calmly out of the gardens and back onto the still deserted streets. During the short walk back to his home, Frank didn't see another soul.

Frank drained his glass and sat it back down by the tap. He took one more look in the mirror before turning and heading back for his bed. He flicked out the bathroom light and felt his way along the unlit landing.

In the short time it had taken Frank to empty his bladder and drink a glass of water, the weather outside had become even more fierce. The wind howled now, bashing at the windows and rattling the letterbox downstairs. He stopped at the top of the stairs and listened.

The pain that suddenly struck Frank just then, was so immense that it caused him to cry out so loudly that his screams echoed off the landing and stair walls. He gripped his neck and stumbled forward. His right foot shot out automatically in order to counter-balance, but found only empty space as it dropped down the first step of the stairs. Now Frank found himself crashing headlong the rest of the way. He thrashed helplessly in the dark, his hands searching for a life-line, but there was nothing and his body fell like a rag doll, twisting and tumbling until it came to crumpled heap in the well of the stairs.

Frank's body lay still and lifeless as the weather outside

calmed. The only noise now was the steady drip drip of blood that fell from the tail of the monkey brooch protruding from behind his left ear.

© *Billy Turner 2007*

IT IS WRITTEN

by Matt Finucane

Searching the apartment block for other survivors, Banks found Mrs Crofter weeping and struggling with the door of her flat.

He felt a little like weeping himself, but only a little; the three horrible hours since he'd woken and seen what had happened to his family had tamped his emotions down into a hard ball. He started forward. 'What's wrong? Can I help?'

She gave him a distracted glance. 'My daughter's in there,' she said through tears, rattling at the door handle.

Banks flexed his shoulders as he stepped up to the door. 'And you want to get her out.'

Now her eyes were glassy and round, and she gripped his arm. 'No! I want her to stay inside.'

As she quickly replaced her hand on the door and braced it against the keyplate, Banks realised the door was jolting outward, its lock broken. Mrs Crofter was trying to hold it shut. 'So she's…'

'Like all those poor people in the street,' said Mrs Crofter, the last three words a low scream as the door gave a lurch and nearly spilled open.

Banks took hold of the handle and tried to lock his knees, shoes squeaking on the cement floor. 'I'll hold it, you make a run

for the stairs,' he said through gritted teeth.

She might not have heard him – she stared at the shivering door, biting down on her lip. 'I've been out here since twelve o'clock,' she said. She was small and elderly for a fifty-something, and Banks wondered how she'd managed to keep the door shut for an hour. 'Rachael was alright earlier. Then those things flew in the window… A big cloud of them… And they stuck to her…'

'Look – you have to go for the stairs, the fire-escape at the end of the corridor. The lifts aren't working. I think this door's about to come off its hinges.'

The door shuddered under a sudden powerful blow; its upper half sagged out of the frame with a creak. 'She wasn't as strong before,' said Mrs Crofter in a choked voice. 'There must be more of them in there. Sticking to her and making her heavier.'

'We should get out of here. I'm sorry, but whether you come with me or not –'

A few more seconds and he'd have to let go and run. The woman had plainly cracked; perhaps she'd clung to mind and spirit in the dark corridor as grimly as to the door, and his arrival had shattered the bubble. She was still staring at the splintering panels. 'Please…'

The door disintegrated in a blizzard of sawdust. She saw her daughter in the jagged gap and began screaming.

Rachael's head was encased in a glistening ball of silver-black particles, an outsized globe that made her lurch drunkenly. It shifted like a drowsing swarm of insects, but the light behind her from the apartment windows glittered on metal. Rachael raised her hands and Banks saw they were gloved in the substance, tarry overflow dripping from her fingers.

Mrs Crofter was still screaming; Banks considered grabbing her shoulders, but found himself backing away as the misshapen figure in the doorway stumbled closer.

The air around Rachael shimmered and suddenly her hands were bare. A small cloud hung between mother and daughter for a moment, then flew the short distance to Mrs Crofter's head. As he watched, still edging along the corridor, it solidified into a mask.

Mrs Crofter's screams were cut off and she fell without another sound; Rachael stood motionless, spherical head drooping to one side, as the body on the floor writhed. A few seconds later it stood up and both figures began demolishing the rest of the door.

Banks raced down the unlighted staircase. He'd seen something similar twice already, the first time in his parents' flat. After that, he supposed he could excuse himself on being lax about others' welfare; it wasn't an appropriate time to reflect, but nevertheless he also supposed he'd always been selfish.

The idea came to him in the jump from one step to the next. Why hadn't it occurred to him sooner? He'd go to his brother.

Steve was at college in town. He was staying on in his hall of residence, likely to spend private time with his girlfriend. The hall was a new building, very secure, very well-insulated. Its sterile, shut-in atmosphere might be enormously valuable.

Assuming you get there, thought Banks. Assuming they let you in, or that there's even anybody left. Ignoring this with an effort, he waited to regain control of his breathing at the bottom of the stairs, then before doubt could cut in he went outside.

Emerging, he paused to study the crowds standing in the weak afternoon light. All of them had silvery, balloon-shaped heads without faces; none of them moved.

He took a very small step forward.

***

It started as an experiment in graphic design.

Banks had a weak grasp of science, not even a layman's understanding, and cared less. He'd followed the news as it developed, but without taking in the principles behind the technology; something to do with electrical impulses and magnets. Whatever started it, a privately-funded group had discovered the moving letters as a side-product of something more conventional – he wasn't sure, and besides, what did it matter? Tiny specks of alloy, stimulated somehow, became responsive to computer instructions. Once sensitised, they jostled and scurried along a metal surface and made

words. Once sensitised, they couldn't be calmed down again.

The group believed there was a commercial application for this oddity; some eco-piety about cutting down on illuminated signs and billboards, if he remembered right. No more wasteful neon and poisonous ink; here was an emerging corner of the thrifty, non-pollutant future. The initial expenditure of power was slight, and then the particles recharged themselves – he'd read the explanation in a colour supplement and promptly forgotten it. Of course, it didn't catch on; instead of a nice bright digital display announcing arrivals and departures, people had to watch insectile tendrils crawling across a blank surface and coalescing into words, rustling as they went; it was too creepy. Novelty alone wasn't enough, and despite an initial burst of worldwide sales the company had to discontinue research; the secret couldn't be applied to anything heavier than the metal dust. They protested they'd made improvements, that the binding process was smoother and quicker. The alloy was no longer dependent on software, it was voice-responsive even – too late. Banks had never believed they really cared anyway; it was all an extravagant advert for their other work. If so it succeeded; for a few months, the company prospered and gave little thought to disposal of its junked product.

Then the fragments became airborne.

***

Banks had been visiting his family. Not wanting to sleep in his younger brother's poky bedroom, he'd been using the sofa-bed and woken this morning with a slight hangover, a little later than intended. Just outside the front room where he lay, he could hear a continuous, muted sobbing and a strange scraping noise. The sobbing sounded like his father.

Calling out got no response and Banks had hurried through a quick bathroom routine and got dressed, for which he was soon very glad. Selfish as ever: always putting his needs first, or so his parents liked to remind him. Perhaps as a result, it was rare that he saw them; this was a courtesy visit, under duress almost, and one

he was regretting already – hence the hangover. The night before he'd caught up with old friends in town and everything had been a grey picture of pre-Christmas inertia, but perfectly normal. Now it was the weekend, and the street outside that should have been noisy and busy was silent. There was just the cloudy light glimmering on the balcony and his father sobbing in the next room. That and the grating, irregular sound he couldn't identify.

The old man was paralysed, in shock, and so for a while was Banks after he opened the door.

Seeing Banks, he'd jumped up and started blubbering incoherently about getting help, there'd been an accident. At first Banks couldn't understand what he was looking at. When he recognised the thing twitching and rolling on the kitchen floor under a carpet of seething flecks as his mother, he'd had to vomit in a corner.

Then the shimmering mass had extended its arms and dragged his father in.

***

Since bolting from the room, Banks had hidden several floors below in an abandoned apartment. Looking out of the window, he'd seen the grotesque forms congregating on the pavement, straggling into the road until they almost filled the space. There was a gauzy, rippling haze over them, something like smoke but more active – as he watched, coils of the stuff streaked away in all directions, less like smoke now than clouds of gnats. He flashed on the kitchen window, wide open with curtains stirring over his crouched father and the thing on the floor. Once the coldness and nausea passed, he thought he understood.

Below, flurries of the alloy whipped through the air, probing the buildings for open windows and new hosts. A wave of the stuff struck the glass by his head like a handful of gravel, and he'd cringed back with a shrill cry.

***

It was the intermittent slap of drifts against the pane and noises of movement somewhere that forced him out of the apartment. With some idea of finding other uninfected people, he'd begun a disordered, half-hearted search. Arriving on the floor below in time to see a woman he vaguely recognised cornered shrieking at the far end and engulfed by what had been her husband, he'd run some more, and hidden some more. The clouds of particles outside had eventually dispersed.

The infected were left standing in vague groups, but their stillness was total and seemed a solid, permanent thing. Banks had begun to think, to feel he might have a future beyond the gut-sinking numbness of the next few hours or minutes, but still he wanted company. He wanted a band of friends to run the gauntlet with; and so he'd found Mrs Crofter, an acquaintance of his mother's.

***

None of the crowd reacted to his appearance.

With one hand on the half-open door, ready to dart inside, Banks watched for the slightest tremor of awareness – but they were all utterly immobilised, without even the faint activity of people standing at rest. The only movement was a breeze wafting over this maze of statues, vaguely tasting of pennies, subway trains; sweating, weak, he waited for the clouds of dust to enfold him but none came. The tightness in his throat and chest loosened a little, and he took a single pace sideways on legs that felt close to crumpling.

Still no reaction.

Banks sidled another step, still close enough to the door to throw himself inside if the figures twitched. Perhaps they'd suddenly all run at him in a great wall. Perhaps – Stop it, he told himself. But the image wouldn't go away; he stared at the mob until his eyes began to tingle and throw sparks over his vision. You're being stupid. Just because you're alone in the building… Ah, he countered, but he wasn't. That was part of the problem. Still, you've a better chance in there than out in the open – there's food,

you can lock yourself in, wait for help… But all morning, he hadn't heard a siren. The TV and radio in the deserted flat had been nothing but static.

These calculations took a few airless, transfixed seconds. Banks looked at the street ahead, flocked with the distorted figures as far as he could see.

Then he half-turned and began inching his way backward through the door.

Once over the threshold, he heard a blurry sound somewhere overhead. Rigid and locked as if a drawstring had tightened from his belly to his skull, he waited. There it was again – a stumbling of feet. Someone coming down the stairs.

Craning upward, Banks saw a hand sliding along the banister several floors above. He tried to relax his squeezed throat and call out, but stopped – the footsteps were clumsy, uncoordinated. Squinting into the shadows, he made out more of the shape coming down. There was something wrong with its head; he saw a silver-grey gleam where a face should be. As if sensing his attention, the thing began lolloping downward more quickly.

Banks crashed out into the freezing afternoon and hared along the street.

He waited for a start of alertness to pass through the crowd as he raced by, a clutching hand to take his shoulder.

***

The dormitory building was high and black in the winter light, its glass surface shot with captive gleams. Wind wrapped round him in blasts, hissing across the deserted car-park and smelling of space, nothingness. The last of the infected stood frozen outside the chainlink fence, pressed to the wire; it groaned under their weight.

He was past telling himself that looking out for one wearing Steve's clothes was morbid.

There was a revolving door, airtight; he pushed through it into the lobby. The building was silent and heavy with vacancy, as

were the twin greys of concrete and sky outside. Banks hurried up the stairs before fright could weight him down.

Steve lived on the fourth floor; Banks met nobody and saw nothing on his way, racing up the stairs with a thick bloody taste growing in the back of his throat.

Steve's door was open, and the sight stopped him dead. Thoughtless and breathless, he stood with mouth hanging open and groped the wall for support, struggling with a renewed need to be sick. Through the door he could see an overturned table, books and papers spilled on the carpet.

The oblong of double-glazed window, one that opened on an outward slant at the top, was ajar.

Banks regarded the opening with a neutrality beyond any feeling at all, barely registering a sudden stir in the air until a torrent of grey whipped against the sill and poured toward him.

With a hoarse scream, he slammed the door.

***

The hissing of the dust-cloud paced him along the outer wall.

After a blank interval, he came to himself gripping the stair rail high above the lobby and making a strange, asthmatic moaning noise. Through the glass of the revolving door he could see a grey blizzard whirling in the parking lot a few feet beyond, a vortex that waited just for him.

Strength and purpose seemed to bleed out of him with every tread back up the stairs.

Wish I'd bothered learning to drive, he thought – Left it a little late.

It was getting dark. With the power off, shadows joined up to fill the corridors like rising water, swallowing detail; he found himself in a long passageway he couldn't be sure he recognised. One of the doors nearby was open a crack and he slammed it on reflex, but without urgency.

As the noise shot flatly down the passage, another door sprang open further along.

For a long time Banks and the girl watched each other, not speaking.

'I'm not a student,' he said at last.

'…Aren't you.'

It'd been the first thing his exhausted mind could dredge up to break the silence, but he realised she was hovering in the doorway as if about to leap back into her room. It must have sounded odd; perhaps his voice and face were odd too. Banks couldn't find the right response and wondered if some overloaded beam had snapped in his mind. He forced a smile. 'I came to see my brother. Steve Banks. But he's not here.'

'Steve?' Recognition crossed her face for a moment, then she flinched at some shock of memory.

'Oh, you know him then.'

The girl hadn't stopped studying him with a hard edge of wariness. She was slender, almost boyish, with a very thin pale face and a lot of straight, reddish-brown hair. Banks had never seen her before, although he'd spent as much time with his brother as he was able. Why couldn't she stop staring at him like that? 'Yes, I did. He's –'

'Not here, I know. Do you think anyone'd mind if I stayed in one of these rooms for a while? Just a few hours, I mean.'

'Steve's outside,' she said in a slow, careful voice. 'With the rest.'

'Oh.'

Again, his vagueness seemed to trouble her. She frowned, shaking her head without realising she did it.

He wanted to tell her it wasn't lack of feeling, he wasn't all selfishness, but maybe she was too young and righteous to understand. Then his stretched face began to ache and he found he was still smiling.

'So what are you going to do now?' Her tone implied that was his concern alone.

Banks didn't know. He made an open-handed, confused gesture to stop the door's progress as she began to close it – he didn't want to be left on his own.

There was a furious rattling on the stairs.

They gaped at each other, like two people stunned by a realisation of love. The hollow, metallic slithering got closer, lost its echo – then the far end of the corridor disappeared in a curtain of grey. Banks watched it boil toward them a feeling of overwhelming inevitability; after all, in a building this size who knew how many ways inside there were?

The girl had ducked into her room and the door was almost closed. Panicking, Banks jammed his heel and elbow against the shrinking margin and felt them crushed against the jamb. 'Don't!' he shouted. 'That's not fair! It's not fucking fair!'

With a convulsive shove he threw the door open, making her stagger back. He got a momentary glimpse of the room before she was trying to push him out again; her eyes were rolling back in her head with fear. She wasn't strong or heavy enough to force him out but as they scuffled in the doorway the cloud grew closer, so close he could see individual motes in a complex orbital dance as they arrowed toward his face. 'No time…' he pleaded.

She made to punch him and he caught her wrist, unbalancing them both; they tottered out into the corridor – then the cloud was upon them.

Banks swung her round and pushed her into it.

She screamed for a second, then silence. Banks heard the whisper of particles knitting around her head as he ran away.

***

Three floors up, he heard the whispering pursuit start again.

Looking wildly down into the stairwell he saw a dull veil of silver pass over the space below as the cloud streamed upward. Trailing after it came the girl, head sealed in a grotesque, sparkling crash helmet.

Sobbing, Banks scrambled up more flights of stairs, and more, until black jungles of veins flashed in his eyes like X-ray plates at each heartbeat. There was a door ahead and he blundered toward it with a feeling like drifting up and separating from his own body

– gasping, he burst into the cold air of the rooftop.

He was on a concrete field dotted with chimneys and skylights, the wind slicing into him. No way off the roof visible, no convenient pipes or fire escapes.

He looked at the green hills and woods visible around the city from this height, trying to frame a convincing thought about finding no better place to end up; then the clatter of something slipping under the door to the roof broke his concentration.

You're being pushed into a corner, he told himself as he steeled his inner reserves to repel the cloud gathering around him. Fight it anyway.

But Banks jumped.

***

Rushing toward the ground, he started to laugh: he could see it all.

It had started as an experiment in design – the words became airborne – the words became responsive to every anxiety they snagged from the thoughts of people everywhere.

As he fell, Banks saw the word spelled out on the car-park, replicated again and again across the city, maybe the world; he had to admire the moving letters. They had caught the mood, and crystallised it.

He plunged into a grey page with THE END written on it in human bodies, each head part of a letter, each letter part of a word scribbled in pencil; realising his trajectory took him just past them with their pin heads spelling out something that could be seen from space, he started to laugh. His landing would make a messy full stop.

'Form and function!' he shouted, air rushing into his mouth. 'That's good design!'

Then he hit the pavement.

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HOME TRUTH

by Christopher L. Jones

The call came at precisely four pm. My wife regularly called me at work - mainly to see if I was popping out of the office at lunch so I could do some spur of the moment food shopping, or to tell me just how badly our two children were behaving and how close she was to strangling the pair of them. But this call was different. This one was informing me that whilst she and the children were visiting her parents some fifteen miles away, she'd decided that, seeing as the children were having such a great time, they'd be staying the night.

This was a phone call I liked. Although I always missed the kids when they stayed over at their grandparent's - our house was always so big and empty without them – it did give me the chance to indulge myself, to regress back a few years and enjoy a brief snippet of a time now long gone – the days of bachelorhood.

Even before the conversation had ended I'd already planned my evening. A visit to the chip shop on my way home would be my first port of call, then, as the chips drowned in a bath of vinegar on my lap I'd watch one of my favourite films on DVD that would never normally see the light of day in my wife's presence. After that, I'd take it from there. The evening was my oyster.

When the end of my working day came I was away from my desk as soon as was physically possible. The thirty minute drive

home was uneventful, the traffic mercilessly free of hold-ups and, with the chip shop empty, I was parking the car outside my suburban semi at just before six pm - a record time. The evening had started well.

The dark and gloomy Autumnal night was falling rapidly as I locked the car shut. Despite the cold and damp night air I strolled purposefully up my drive, gazing across to look through my neighbours' bay window as I always, sub-consciously, did. My elderly neighbours, Jean and Edward, sat, as always at this time of the evening, in their dark front room gazing at the early evening television – most probably the news. They both turned their heads simultaneously to look at me; their faces, impassive as they watched, glowing in a grey and blue tone that flicked dark shadows onto their features rendering their eyes a deep black with their noses seemingly distorted at strange angles. I smiled to myself, unsure as to why, and entered my house.

I've never liked my house in the dark, especially tonight when it was uncharacteristically quiet and still. I quickly flicked the hall light on and strode through to the kitchen at the back. Turning on the light I unwrapped my food and was struck as to just how quiet the house was. Feeling a little unnerved I walked out of the kitchen, this time through the door to the dining room (turning on the light) and through into the lounge. Once there, again only after I'd extinguished the dark, I switched on the television – I needed the house to feel alive and lived in, rather than cold and lifeless.

Satisfied, I collected my chips, made myself a quick coffee and settled into my chair to watch the news without the necessity for having to lip read what was being said on screen because of two shouting children.

I was halfway through my meal when the change hit me.

My stomach felt as though it had plummeted out of my body and through the chair. A cold sweat began to break and my heart suddenly doubled in pace. I stopped mid-chew and stared invisibly ahead. For some reason, an image of me as a seven year old came flooding back; in particular the memory of me throwing half a brick at Michael Jarvis's head in the school playground, only to

miss and shatter a window with enough noise to wake the dead. Everyone had turned to look at me and I felt tiny and scared, which was nothing in comparison to the fact that my teacher, the dreaded Mr Simpson, had seen me. That sickness in the pit of my stomach was back.

I was listening, for what I don't know, but I was listening, straining to hear past the noise of the television and into the quiet beyond for any clue as to what had struck my skin to be as cold as stone. I wanted to move, to drown out the sound of yet more death and carnage in some foreign land and to listen - but I was afraid; afraid that if I moved it would shatter the stillness of the room and unleash, in all its fury whatever it was that had inadvertently alerted every nerve ending in my body.

As I sat there, not breathing, I became aware of movement. Not movement as such, but rather the sound of movement which emanated from next door – it was the sound of someone walking up the stairs. This sound, so familiar to me and, at this moment in time, so comforting, prompted me to move out of my armchair and stand in the middle of the room. I silenced the television and stood motionless. The muffled footsteps reached the top of the stairs and moved, slowly to the front bedroom. The feeling that one of my neighbours was only feet away and performing some regular daily function made me feel more comfortable, but the overwhelming sense of dread was still tangible, still very real.

I headed to the kitchen and poured myself a drink.

Calm yourself, I thought. You're being ridiculous.

I picked up the phone and dialled my wife's parents' house; a sizeable sense of relief washed over me when she answered. I asked if she was okay, that the children were alright. Of course they were, why wouldn't they be? came the response. After a brief conversation I was pretty sure I'd managed to convince her that I wasn't beginning to go mad. When I hung up I could tell she was worried. She'd said I'd sounded panicky, not myself. She wondered if I'd been working too hard lately, that maybe I needed a rest. She was probably right; she usually was.

My thoughts broke with the sound of a door slamming some-

where next door. I looked towards the wall that separated our house from theirs and tried to imagine who it might be. Then I heard crying. Quiet at first but, as I moved closer to the wall, I recognised it to be a woman.

Jean.

As I put my hand towards my mouth I realised that I could just make out Edward's voice too, obviously trying to soothe his wife of over sixty years in the best way that he could. My eyes, inexplicably, filled with tears.

After a second glass of fine malt inside me I decided to load the DVD player as planned and settle down as best I could to watch my film. This I did, but the sense of uneasiness still prevailed as did the occasional noise next door. The slam of another door made me jump more than once and the quiet sobbing continued unabated until late into the night. Having the lounge light on full did nothing to ease my tension.

I didn't have a shower that night. I felt uncomfortable with the thought of closing a bathroom door which didn't have a lock and then shutting myself off further behind a flimsy shower curtain. I had images of somebody dressed as Norman Bates' mother entering silently and tearing it down and hacking freely at me whilst I slipped and slid on the wet enamel bath, grabbing at the knife in a hopeless attempt at self preservation. That scene always freaked me out, it wasn't so much the murder, but the fact that you couldn't see the killers face, only a pair of enraged eyes illuminated by the light reflected off of a nine-inch carving knife.

I shivered at the thought as I lay in my bed staring at the ceiling. I'd been in bed for ten minutes when the thought struck me so hard in the chest that my heartbeat pounded at my eardrums.

My bedroom door was unlocked.

The house was built in the mid-1930s and the original bedroom doors had old, single bolt locks on them. I'd never considered locking the door before but tonight I kicked myself at not thinking of it earlier. Again I felt that any sudden movement may trigger a shattering of the stillness of the room, a sign for the killer to strike from out of the darkness.

Trying to block this from my mind, I slowly peeled back the covers and swung my legs over the bed. My feet settled on the deep carpet and I stood slowly up. Instinctively, I moved towards the door that was at the foot of the bed. I reached out for the key that hung in the lock and touched the end with my thumb and index finger. As I did so, another bang resounded from next door and I physically jumped back, loosing grip of the key which fell from the lock and into the shadows below. I swore under my breath and got down on all fours, searching the pile with my hands. After what seemed an eternity, the cold metal made itself known to my fingers and I wrapped it quickly in my palm. In one quick motion I stood up, locked the door and jumped quickly back into bed, bringing the covers up to my chin.

It took several minutes for my heartbeat to slow to anywhere near its normal rhythm, and in doing so I drifted, uncomfortably, into sleep.

I dreamt that night dreams I never want to experience again. I dreamt of smothering and of being trapped in my body and being unable to move. I dreamt of invisible terror and of loved ones now gone.

I woke up the next morning crying.

Work the next day was more of a chore to get through than normal. I couldn't shake the images of my dreams; the more I tried the more clear they were. Then came the call.

The call came at precisely four pm. My wife's voice was deeper than normal and shaking - something was terribly wrong.

'What's the matter? What's wrong? Are the kids okay? ', I asked.

'Yes. Yes, they're fine,' she'd replied. She went on to tell me that when she'd arrived home from her mum's there were police cars parked in the road. 'They were right outside our house', she's said. 'I thought it was you. I thought something had happened to you.'

She carried on to say that after parking the car in the drive a policeman had appeared by the front gate and had asked to have a word. 'Oh God it's awful', she'd said. 'Those poor people.'

'What's happened?', I demanded.

'It's Jean and Edward,' she said between sobs. 'They're dead!'

I slumped in my chair as the shock from those few, small words made me so numb that I almost dropped the phone. My colleagues later told me that at that precise moment the colour visibly drained from my face.

'Dead?', my voice sounded detached and lost.

'Those poor people,' she said again, sniffing repeatedly. 'It's some comfort to know I suppose that they wouldn't have known much about it.'

'Wouldn't have known? Why?'

'The policeman told me it was most likely a faulty boiler in their kitchen. They died from carbon monoxide poisoning.'

With this my wife burst into tears. I tried to picture them in my mind, but as is so often the case with these things I found that I couldn't. They'd been lovely people. It was an awful thing to happen.

'Did they find them in bed or something? ', was all I could ask.

'What?'

'Jean and Edward, did they find them in bed?'

'No,' my wife replied. 'That's the awful thing. They found them in their chairs in the front room. Looks like they'd just settled down in front of the telly with their tea and they just drifted off. They've been dead since late yesterday afternoon!'

My mind raced. No, that was impossible. I'd seen them when I arrived home, they were there. They'd looked at me. I'd heard them talking, heard them moving around. My mind struggled to comprehend the facts, so much so that I tried desperately to push away the one thought that seemed stronger than all the rest.

The only explanation I could comprehend, the only reason for those feelings that I had felt, was that, in my kitchen the previous night, I'd heard the dead voice of a loving husband trying to soothe, as best he could, the crying spirit of his recently deceased wife.

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ROAST BEEF

By Martin J. Parsons

It was over. Thinking back on it, Serena was surprised at how little resistance her husband had put up. She put this down to the alcohol.

I warned him, she thought to herself, seeking to quell the remorse that she could feel worming its way biliously from her stomach into her throat.

Next time you touch me I'll kill you, Dave, I swear!

But he had touched her. It was Tuesday night, twenty-three minutes after Dave had awkwardly fumbled his way into the house after a six-hour session at the pub. She had tried so desperately to be asleep before he arrived, despite knowing that he would wake her with his clumsy attempts to screw her.

At least if I'm asleep then I can't be in any way responsible for what he does to me.

However, sleep had not come to her that night, and she heard Dave as he fought to open the door and then slowly, heavily, climbed the stairs.

His trousers had already been around his ankles when he shoved the bedroom door open. From the smell and the stains down his shirt Serena could tell that he had vomited. She rolled over so she didn't have to look at him.

'Sreena?' Dave had whispered, his voice slurred to the extent

that he seemed to be talking through water.

She hadn't answered immediately, and she knew this was a mistake.

'Dongnore me Sreena…I wanna kish.'

She didn't turn, but she gently shrugged her shoulders. 'No, Dave. You're drunk. Stop being silly and get into bed.'

For a moment Dave was silent, and Serena almost believed that he would obey her. Almost.

He leapt forward with surprising agility for someone in his state of inebriation and grasped her shoulder, his large meaty thumb digging in agonisingly behind her scapula. Serena yelled out and drew her leg upwards, then kicked back as hard as she could. Luck was on her side, and her heel dug hard into his groin.

Dave roared and fell backwards into the doorway. Serena leapt from the bed and desperately tried to charge him. His left arm swung out and connected with the side of her neck. She lost her balance and fell hard into their chest of drawers. Knick-knacks flew around her and smashed on the linoleum, small clay figures that she had made, tiny parts of her. As she attempted to straighten up her hand grasped something cold and hard. Not wanting to take her eyes of Dave, who stood and stared at her angrily, his stance reminding her of a Neanderthal, she quickly glanced down at what she was holding. It was a column of glass, roughly a foot long and very heavy for its size. It was too dark to see then, but inside the glass two figures had been laser-etched. A bride and groom. It had been a wedding gift. Happier times.

'Dave!' Serena was surprised at the ferocity of her own voice. It was as though her voice box remembered the bruises and had found a pair of balls.

'You better stop, Dave. Next time you touch me I'll kill you, Dave, I swear!'

Despite the hardness of her words, the strength had gone form her voice. She was pleading with him, desperate not to have to act on her promise.

Dave began moving towards her, his eyes alight with anger.

'You bish!' he screamed, his fists raised.

His right hand slapped her in the face, hard enough to make her canine tooth dig into her gum. A trickle of blood ran down her chin. Her vision blurred, and the next few moments passed her by. If she had been asked about those few seconds she could honestly say that she had no recollection of them.

Then it was over. Dave was gone.

***

It had been a simple task to clean up the bedroom. For the first time in her life Serena was happy that she had acquiesced to Dave's demands for a lino floor. A luxury carpet wouldn't have been able to keep as many secrets. The question of what to do with the body had only lasted a couple of minutes. As Serena swept up the fragments of her figurines into a dustpan it became clear to her.

The hardest part was moving him: he was a large man, and his dead weight was incredibly hard to shift. Again the linoleum helped, but once he was out on the carpeted halls and stairs Serena was only able to move him a few feet before she had to stop for breath. She thought of all the times that she had had to pull him up the stairs and the irony caused her to snicker, and then giggle softly. She could have sat on the stairs and laughed and laughed but the urgency of her situation just about kept her focussed.

She had to be careful on the stairs, because he was laid on his back and she was pulling him by his arms so that none of the blood from where his face had once been would leave a mark, and she didn't fancy tripping backwards on the stairs and ending up beneath him. Again she found irony in the idea of being beneath his dead weight, but this time she caught herself before the giggles.

Once she was out of the house Serena began dragging him roughly across the yard, no longer fearing his leaving a mark. It was raining softly, and by morning any traces of Dave on the yard would be in the drains and beyond. It didn't take long to reach the studio, a squat brick building with two tinted windows, and blue door and a tall steel chimney. Serena pushed open the door. It was never locked: their nearest neighbours were half a mile away and

Serena felt she could handle losing her clay if someone did decided to steal it. Dave's body caught on the doorjamb for a second, but Serena kicked him hard and he came through. She reached for the light switch, flicked it and the 60 watt bulb flickered into life to illuminate the sparse room. There were two tables, one at either end, upon which sat various trinkets that Serena hadn't yet finished. Stacked up against the far wall were seven boxes of clay, and beside these was what she had come for. The kiln was about three metres wide and deep, and almost two high. It had two large doors on the front and from the top came the chimney that was visible outside.

Serena dropped Dave and went to the kiln. She pulled open the doors surveyed the interior. The walls were roughly a foot thick, but there was still ample space for her purposes. There were six metal shelves in the kiln, and she pulled out three: she left one at the bottom for Dave, and the two at the top were too difficult to pull out.

She hefted Dave towards the kiln, again by his arms. She placed him as close as she could to the kiln, then stepped over him and rolled him over the metal lip. First she only managed to get his upper body inside, so she grasped his buttocks firmly and pushed until he was inside up to his ankles. She hadn't been coordinated enough to fit him in the full width of the oven so she had to bend his legs until they were inside. She hadn't stopped to pull up his trousers, and now that his face was obscured in the shadows of the kiln he was a comical sight. For one moment Serena considered redressing him, but then she thought about pulling him out again and decided against it. Instead she pushed the doors closed and locked them, then walked round to the far side of the kiln and turned a large valve affixed to a metal box on the wall. A hiss filled the room, and Serena waited half a minute before she pressed the small red button next to the valve. The gas ignited with a whoompf.

Serena leant against the wall and slowly slid to the floor. From the kiln she could hear the sizzle and pop of flesh burning, and the wheeze of the water on the clothes turning to steam. The sounds were rhythmic and Serena found them soothing. She watched the

rain fall softly outside, and listened to her husband burn, and fell asleep.

***

The first thing Serena noticed when she awoke was the heat. She was lying next to the kiln and one side of her face was being warmed by it. She quickly shuffled away from it: the walls were well insulated but it still got damn hot when it was fully fired up. For a second she wondered why she had fallen asleep next to the kiln in her pyjamas, but then she noticed something else, something that initially comforted and then horrified her. It was the smell. The smell of Dave. The smell of roast beef.

Serena looked at the kiln, felt with her tongue the lump inside her mouth, and the memory of what she had done surfaced. She began to cry. First tears fell down her cheeks, then her whole body was wracked with sharp convulsions as she sobbed violently. She stood up quickly, and made for the door. A wave of dizziness struck her and she fell to her knees. She sniffed hard and the smell assailed her nostrils. She vomited, tried to stand, and then vomited again. It came flooding out of her until she was coughing up water, and then she was doing nothing but dry heaving. She fell onto her back and lay next to the stinking pool, her face covered in tears and snot and sick.

***

It was another two hours before she got up again. She considered stopping to clear up the mess but then decided against it. The smell was almost gone now, but she didn't want to stay in the studio for another minute. She went back to the house and took off her pyjamas, then stuck them into the washing machine. She set it for the hottest wash, and stuck in two times the amount of washing powder than she would normally use.

She quickly checked over the bedroom: she had cleared up all the broken pottery, and gone over the floor with an entire packet of

disposable disinfectant wipes that had all been flushed away. The glass column she had wiped and then replaced on the chest of drawers: it was completely undamaged, the bride and groom still stood happily in their transparent home.

Serena went into the bathroom and stood under the shower. The water was set to Dave's preferred temperature, which she found far too hot, but she didn't bother to readjust it. She scrubbed her face, wincing as she touched the spot on her cheek where her tooth had dug in.

Once she had finished she dried herself quickly and then dressed. She changed into her jeans and overall, the ones that she used when she was working in the studio. Another irony. She was going to be working in the studio. This time she didn't even snicker. Laughter had left her for the moment.

***

She came back into the house sometime later and poured herself a glass of water. As soon as the liquid touched her tongue she wretched and spat it out. The glass fell from her hand and smashed on the floor. She tutted as she began to clear it up, but in reality she was glad of the distraction it presented. She had taken Dave from the kiln, shrivelled and black, and then carried him to the small copse of woods behind their house. It wasn't technically their property, but she felt confident that his body would not be discovered. She had placed him on a marshy piece of ground and then covered him with leaves. Before that, she had sprinkled some curry powder across his body. Serena didn't want any dogs taking an interest in the body, unlikely though it seemed given its condition, and she remembered the scene from Cool Hand Luke where Paul Newman escapes the tracker dogs. If anything did get a whiff of his body it wouldn't like the sting it got if it stuck its snout in too close.

Serena was satisfied that she had thought of everything. The smell of sick still lingered in her nose, so she went to her medicine cabinet and got the nasal spray that she had bought for Dave in an attempt to stop his chronic snoring. It wasn't very pleasant but it

was better than vomit.

She was about to go out and clean the studio when their kitchen calendar caught her eye. The square for that day, Wednesday 27th October, had been circled with a red marker pen. Serena moved closer, and read the words she had written there two weeks ago. Two weeks? she thought to herself, and was shocked at how distant that seemed.

Dinner with Lydia and Tom, the square said.

For a moment fear rose in Serena's chest, but then she remembered that the invitation had come from them. She didn't think she could handle someone in her house just yet. Her hand reached for the telephone, and then stopped. She had been about to call and make her apologies. But then what? Sit around here forever?

At some point, she realised, she was going to have to face other people. And Lydia was an old friend, and not the sort of person to ask questions if she explained that she was very sorry but Dave had got work on a site in Ireland for two months and had to leave suddenly. She knew that Lydia had always seen through Dave, and so she would just be thankful that he wasn't there.

Serena inhaled deeply, clenched her fists, exhaled, and then went upstairs to make herself presentable.

***

Lydia and Tom Beresford lived in Sheffield, which was just over two hours drive away. On the way Serena's mind was constantly on Dave. He had no job, and as far as she was aware, he had no real friends. He would go drinking at the Wheatsheaf three nights a week, but the type of people there wouldn't care if he disappeared completely. Just to be safe she thought that she would go in and tell them the Ireland for two months story, or maybe make it Nova Scotia for six months. That way his disappearance would not be questioned, and by the time that he should have returned he would have been forgotten. His mother might call, but she had not done so in three years and Serena severely doubted that she would after the last time they had spoken. All in all, Serena felt that she

had been a good little husband killer. The laughter returned to her.

***

She arrived at the Beresford's at a little after two o'clock. It was Lydia who opened the door, and Serena marked with satisfaction the look of joy on her face when she saw that Dave wasn't there.

'Serena! How are you, love? Come on in, its cold out today!'

She ushered Serena across the threshold and then took her coat from her. Before she closed the door she glanced outside as though expecting Dave to appear. Serena saw her and smiled: 'Dave's not coming, unfortunately. It's quite good news, actually. He's landed a job with a firm who do contracts in Nov-' she paused for a second, but Lydia didn't seem to notice, 'In Ireland, and he had to go off yesterday afternoon!'

Relief filled Lydia's face, but she managed to make it look like happiness: 'Oh, I'm so glad! It'll be good to have you both working again…two wages are always better than one!'

Serena knew what Lydia was really thinking. Lydia was happy that her friend wouldn't be turning up at her house covered in bruises, at least not for a while. Lydia had nurses training, and the 'walking into a door' routine didn't wash with her (Serena had been careful to hide the mark from last night's events). However, she was far too good a friend to have ever said anything about it, other than telling Serena that her door would always be open. Serena was glad of a friend like Lydia today. She hugged her.

At that moment Tom came into the hall. Tom was the sort of man that Serena would love to have married. He has tall and blond, and handsome in an understated way. Serena reckoned that he wouldn't be up to much in the bedroom, but he would never lay a finger on a woman. Serena hugged him too.

They moved into the living room, and Lydia fussed Serena into her favourite easy chair. Tom brought a tray of glasses in from the kitchen and placed them down on the coffee table. Serena picked up a glass and swished round the contents. For a moment

she felt queasy, but then she quickly placed the glass to her lips and swallowed the drink – brandy – in one gulp. The warmth slid down her throat and embraced her stomach, and Serena felt relaxed for what felt like the first time in years.

They talked for over an hour: Lydia and Tom's eldest daughter had just got a job in France teaching English, while their younger daughter was still in Cirencester, and their son had gone to Peru for eight months. The mention of children sent a cold shiver down Serena's spine, and she couldn't hide the shudder. Lydia got her another brandy.

For the most part Serena just sat back and let Tom and Lydia talk. She felt tired, and the room was warm. Serena turned her face ever so slightly toward the window, not enough to appear rude but sufficient to feel the weak autumnal sunshine on her face. She began to doze off, the dull hum of the conversation and the occasional tunk of the radiator keeping her just on the edge of sleep.

A shrill beeping pulled her from her reverie. Lydia, who had stopped in the middle of describing the troubles that she and Tom had had in trying to erect a shed in their garden, stood up and made for the kitchen. Serena leapt up and followed her.

'Oh, Serena,' Lydia turned and smiled motheringly, 'You look tired, love! You don't have to help me.'

Serena placed a hand on her arm and smiled back: 'Really, Lydia, I want to.'

'Well alright,' Lydia grinned, 'I'll handle the veggies if you can get the meat and tatties out of the oven.'

Serena nodded, then went and put on a pair of oven gloves. Lydia took three pans off the stove and placed them on wooden triangular stands, then started began draining the pans into colanders. Serena bent down in front of the oven cooker, a big one with eight gas rings and an extractor fan built above, which was busily humming away, and pulled the door open. She saw two trays in the oven. On the bottom shelf was a tray of roast potatoes, and on the top shelf was another tray whose contents she could not see. Serena reached for it and pulled it towards her, then stopped.

It was the smell again. The same one. Roasted beef and roast-

ed Dave.

For a moment Serena was certain that if she pulled the tray out there would be a piece of a person upon it. A hand or a foot, or even a face. Something that was recognisably human. Something that was recognisably Dave. Cautiously she drew the tray towards her, and for a second she felt relieved. It wasn't Dave on the tray, or any other person. It was a cylindrical cut of cow: a joint of roast beef. Then a bubble of fat burst on top of the joint, and Serena saw Dave's body. It had sizzled and seethed, still burning, when she had removed it from the kiln. And the smell…

Serena dropped the tray and stood up, desperate to escape from the kitchen. Part of her heard Lydia ask what the matter was, her voice shaking with worry. The rest of her just had to escape. She fell through the doorway in a dead faint, luckily into Tom's outstretched arms.

'Lyds?' he asked, bewildered.

Lydia came bounding into the living room, took Serena from Tom and laid her on the sofa.

'Lydia? What's wrong with her?'

'I don't know, Tom! Get some brandy for goodness sake!'

Tom quickly poured another glass of brandy and stuck it in Lydia's hand. With her other hand she stroked Serena's forehead until she began to come round. Lydia gently lifted her head and pushed the glass to her lips, then tipped it into her mouth. Serena opened her eyes, coughed slightly, then leant forward and vomited down Lydia's blouse.

***

Around five o'clock that evening, Lydia and Tom Beresford were sat in an office at the Brockman Institute, a private hospital just south of Sheffield. Lydia had spent half an hour on the telephone making calls to her nursing friends, desperately trying to find somewhere to take Serena. She had been sick five times, and then she had begun to cry. Despite numerous attempts to get through to her, Serena had not said a word. Once or twice she

mumbled something that might have been 'Dave', but nothing intelligible had passed her lips since she offered Lydia help in the kitchen. Finally Lydia had got in touch with Elena Portaluri, an old colleague who had moved into hospital management, and through her had managed to secure a bed at the Brockman Institute. Tom suggested that they might just as easily have taken her to a normal hospital, but Lydia didn't like the idea of her friend being sat in a waiting room in front of many sets of prying eyes while she waited to be seen to when they could easily afford to send her somewhere nice and quiet.

They had been sat in the office for around an hour, during which time Lydia had bitten away £300 worth of manicure, when a stocky grey haired man of around sixty came into the room and sat facing them at the desk.

'Hello, I'm Doctor William Morley,' he said, pulling at his grey beard, 'I gather you're the ones who brought in our new patient, Ms Serena McKinnaugh?'

Lydia nodded.

'Well I'm afraid I can't really tell you anything at the moment as I haven't seen Serena yet myself. I'm told that we've not been able to communicate properly with her, but we've given her a very mild sedative and she seems to have calmed down considerably. The admitting houseman told me that it just came on suddenly, this…this episode?'

'Yes,' Lydia said, her voice tiny, 'We were about to have some dinner and…oh, she'll be hungry …'

Tom took his wife's hand and kissed it. Doctor Morley leant forward and smiled benignly: 'Listen, why don't you two go home? I'm sure there's no reason to wait around and worry yourselves anymore. We've got your number and I promise that if anything happens I'll let you know.'

Lydia looked as though she wanted to argue, then looked down and nodded slowly: 'Yes. Yes, that probably would be for the best.'

'So then, you two go home and get as good a night's rest as you can, and I'll see you both tomorrow. By which time I'm sure Ms McKinnaugh will be feeling much better. And don't worry,' he

added, as Lydia opened her mouth to speak, 'I'll personally make sure she gets some food tonight as well. Even if I have to cook it myself!' he gave Lydia a wink and she smiled back at him.

'Thank you, Doctor Morley. We'll be back tomorrow.'

'I look forward to seeing you both. Goodbye.'

Tom and Lydia stood, Tom shook Doctor Morley's hand, and then they both left.

Doctor Morley sat back for a moment, steepled his fingers, and then twisted them in his beard. When he had finished ruminating he made a quick call down to the kitchen, then got up to go and see his new patient.

***

Serena was sat on a single bed in a magenta room. Personally Doctor Morley found the colour repulsive, but he had been told that patients responded well to it. When he came into the room she looked at him, and he recognised immediately that she was in a very fragile mental state. It could be delayed shock, he thought. He decided to tread very gently with her.

'Hello, Serena. My name is Doctor Morley. William.'

Serena regarded him curiously for a moment, then stared into the middle distance again.

'Do you know why you're here, Serena? Can you remember anything that happened to you today?'

Once again she looked towards him, but Doctor Morley knew her expression too well: she wouldn't be disclosing anything to anyone for quite a while.

'It's okay, Serena.' Doctor Morley lightly touched her shoulder, 'I'll come and see you tonight…no, no don't worry,' he added, seeing a hint of exasperation cross her face, 'I'll just see how you're doing, and then we can talk again tomorrow, alright?'

Serena nodded slowly.

'Good. Try and sleep now, Serena.'

Doctor Morley stood up, shook his right leg a little and turned to leave. As he did so a tall, thin woman in a mauve auxiliary

nurse's outfit opened the door and entered the room. She had red hair tinged with grey tied back in a tight bun, a jutting chin and a pair of stern-looking blue-grey eyes. Her cheeks were caked in foundation, lending her a deathly pallor that caused Serena to shudder involuntarily.

The auxiliary carried with her a small plastic bowl, its contents covered by plastic guard. A thin plume of steam rose from its centre.

'Hello, Miss Atkins,' Doctor Morley whispered, 'This is the new one, Serena McKinnaugh. Tread gently, we're not altogether sure what's wrong with her yet.'

Miss Atkins surveyed the figure lying on the bed, and a warmth appeared in her expression that offset her sharp features and coldly immaculate grooming.

'Is she safe to have hot foods, Doctor? I could just as easily go back and get some sandwiches if you think…'

Doctor Morley tapped her arm lightly, cutting her off mid-sentence. He lifted the guard slightly and sniffed. His lips curled up into a smile: after nearly thirty years of suffering with NHS catering, he always marvelled at the dishes served up by private sector hospitals.

'I think that's just the thing she needs, actually, Miss Atkins.'

He took the bowl from her and proffered it to Serena, who murmured softly and turned her head away from him.

'Now, now, Serena,' Doctor Morley said, in the fluting, saccharine voice that he liked to use on children, 'You really don't want to miss this. We've got mashed potatoes, roast onions and…'

Serena looked back at him and stared deep into his eyes, causing him to pause for a second. Her gaze fell to the bowl as he lifted the guard theatrically and pushed it towards her face.

Serena's anguished scream echoed through three wards.

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ALMOST LOVE

by Roger B Pile

A thick fog had begun to wind from the narrow alleys and along the streets, reducing the light of the flickering gas lamps to a feeble glow. A hansom cab drove by, the horse's hooves ringing sparks from the cobbles. I moved closer to the inside of the pavement. It was beginning to rain.

I was walking briskly up Threadneedle Street, nearing the east end, when the boy selling newspapers stepped into my path. I reached into my pocket and handed the boy some change. 'Mind how you go, sir. There's been another murder.'

I thanked him and walked on along the street. I did not really consider myself in any danger, since so far all of the victims had been women.

As I entered the warren of streets and slum tenements, I wondered what had prompted Victoria to take an apartment in this area. It was not as if money came into it. Now that I thought of it a large number of people I knew had settled in this or similar districts. I could not decide if they were merely slumming, or if there was genuinely something in the atmosphere of the place which appealed to their mentality.

A girl with a shawl hung around her shoulders, her dress appearing shabby and moth eaten even in the wan streetlamp, noticed me approaching and stood straighter, her mouth assuming

the distinctive moue of the prostitute. I looked away and walked on but could not resist another glance back at her, since she was quite attractive, with fine patrician features. I wondered at my own discipline, since I could easily afford her and there was no risk of infection or recrimination. I think that I half suspected her of being a lady in disguise, but even this was no real reason for not enjoying her. A little puzzled at my own thoughts I continued on down the street, then turned down a side street where alleys branched off into a maze of courts.

I knew the maze well by now and traversed its winding passages and yards rapidly, my footsteps echoing from the stones. Here and there I found surprising changes; someone had dug over and replanted a small central garden in one courtyard, and the scent of night blooming jasmine hung heavy on the air. In others, fountains, dry and broken for ages, trickled anew, and window boxes had been placed on sills.

I reached a yard where a statue of a centaur, covered in ivy, lay broken on its side close by a flight of steps. I climbed the steps and entered a bleak looking hall. Stairs led up, flight after flight of them, and as I set foot on the uppermost landing, I saw the crack of light under her door which showed that she was at home. She was expecting me, but I knew that would not have deterred her from flitting out into the night like an irresponsible juvenile and leaving me to enter an empty apartment.

I knocked and entered at the sound of her voice.

The room was coloured in tints of amber, honey and deep crimson. The carpet was thick; my footsteps were soundless. Drapes hung around the walls, framing the rich colours of Renaissance paintings, which hung like windows onto another world; framing the bay windows which stood like black mirrors against the night. The bed was like a mountain of snow white clouds, hung on all sides with dense curtains of lace.

She stood at one of the windows, sipping from a glass. She wore a close fitting, full length peach coloured dress, flounced below the knee, cut low down the back. I dropped the newspaper on a table and went to her. I could not wait to take off my coat. I

took her in my arms, kissed the side of her face and neck. I was working down to the interesting valley between her breasts, when I realised that her mind was not on this and that she was trying to put down the champagne glass. 'I'm sorry,' she said; 'I suppose I'm not in the mood just now.'

I was puzzled; I had not seen her like this before. 'Why did you come then?' I said.

'Perhaps because there was nowhere else.' She walked into the centre of the room, noticed the newspaper, picked it up. I was not sure if she was reading it or just using it to occupy her restless hands. 'If this is where we are when we're awake, where do we go in our dreams?'

'Victoria...?'

'It's alright.' She smiled, flicked her hair - white blonde, platinum blonde -tossed the newspaper aside so that it lay in a tumble of pages on the floor beside a sofa. 'Look,' she said, 'I think it would be a good idea if we went out tonight. This is getting too routine. I'm sorry, but I really don't just want to go to bed and fuck again just now.' Her eyes watched me with that odd combination of challenge, invitation, insecurity, fear; and I knew that it was all part of her chosen role but I still couldn't help feeling more in love with her than ever.

'All right,' I said, 'We'll go out.'

We stood at the top of a white tower which rose like a ghostly finger above the city in the night. We had eaten in a small restaurant and danced, and then had wandered out into the grounds of a nearby cathedral. Our path had led with a kind of inevitability to the tower, where we climbed through the tiered gardens surrounding it, and then up the winding steps. The river twisted below us, catching reflections of lighted windows and streetlamps. The city was like a map of light spread out all around.

'I love you,' I said.

'I know.'

'Are you unhappy?'

'It's not that exactly. I mean, it's as if there should be more.

Do you think that's why he's killing us?' She turned to look at me; her pale hair was coiffed up around her face. Her eyes were lost in deep pools of shadow. 'Do you think he's frustrated and wants more than love?'

I was going to say that there were wars to fight, but I knew straight away that that was no answer in itself. Whoever was doing the killings wanted something more than the simple thrill of conflict and bloodletting. 'Perhaps he's psychotic,' I said, as if that was any kind of answer at all.

The killings made no sense. They were sexually motivated, in a city where sex was freely available, where there was no risk of infection; they were sadistic, in a place where every deviation could be catered for. They were horrendous.

'The trauma must be terrible,' she said.

We walked home through the winding streets. We didn't talk a great deal; I found myself wondering more and more about the killer. I almost suspected that he had come here to add a kind of threat to a place which lacked threat of any other kind.

I left her at the stairs to her apartment.

'I'm sorry about tonight. I guess I'm a difficult bitch sometimes.'

'Very.' I hugged her and watched her climb the stairs and vanish up into the dark. I waited for a time. I thought I had heard someone following, but no one appeared.

I let my feet carry me where they would, and entered an even more run down area close by the waterfront. I passed an opium den. From outside it was just a door set in the wall of a crumbling warehouse, but once, a long time ago, I had entered one of these places and found that the sordid exterior hid a maze of stairways and rooms, which held a kind of seedy opulence with their divans and curtains, where men and women, sometimes alone and sometimes in couples or small groups lay in drugged sleep. For these, even the city could not provide rich enough dreams of itself; and so the dens had been created to take them beyond even its walls into places I could not begin to imagine. I remembered her saying 'If this is where we go when we're awake, where do we go in our

dreams?'

***

I was walking along a quayside when the premonition came to me. I looked around, trying to find some reason for it: a sense of unease, fear. Puzzled, I retraced my steps through the streets and alleys. They were rarely deserted. A carriage rattled past the end of a narrow lane; a group of men and women, drunk, supporting one another, laughing, called to me to join them, and the calls turned to jeers as I walked on, more quickly now. And at last I came again to the maze of alleys and courtyards where she lived. I waited there a long time. I tried to pick out her window from below; I thought that I had correctly identified it. I saw a shadow move to the window, drawing the curtains. I waited still longer, wondering why I simply couldn't bring myself to climb the steps. I felt a distinct presence close beside me, but I was alone in the courtyard; there was only a trickling fountain and the broken centaur.

I returned to my home.

I picked myself weakly from the bed, pulled loose the trailing threads of optic fibre, the electrodes which attached to my arms and legs and genitals. I pulled off the light shell-like mask and pushed aside the flap of the transparent plastic tent which regulated the air.

I made my way across the bare boards to the window and looked down into the empty street. The bright daylight was always a shock after the darkness of the city. It was always night there.

Much thought had gone into designing the city; it had been created only after hundreds of thousands of interviews and census forms had been completed.

The programmers had been thorough. It was a city of dreams, where anyone could live out any role, enact their most bizarre fantasies.

Demand had been immense.

I felt confused, but it was different to the usual period of read-

justment. I could not forget the feeling I had had in the courtyard below her window. The feeling of someone close by, when there had been no one at all.

I dressed slowly and made coffee. Sitting at the kitchen table I reached absently as I always did for cigarettes, before remembering that I did not smoke here. Only in the city.

I knew that I had no reason to feel worried.

No murderer could inflict physical harm on victims whose physical bodies lay safe in their own homes, bodies linked into the city only through the interface of the beds. The victims would experience something like a nightmare, perhaps, some trauma even, but no more. But still the feeling would not leave me.

Then the idea came to me with the cold sensation of a knife touching my stomach.

I got to my feet and made my way to the door and down the stairs to the street. I tried to run, and cursed the long term inactivity that had rendered my legs weak as jelly. But somehow I did run down empty streets, past houses with closed curtains, past cars which stood rusting in parking lots.

Then I was entering the maze of alleys and courtyards, decrepit and overgrown with weeds. The fountain in the courtyard was stagnant, moss covered. I climbed the circling flights of stairs and pushed open the door.

She lay spreadeagled across the white bed in a bath of blood, in a tangle of tubes and wires and the slashed remains of the tent. She lay with her upturned face over the edge of the bed. There were red slashes across her stomach and legs, and criss-crossing her face and throat and abdomen. Broken tubes dripped redundant life supporting fluids into the pools of blood. A dark shape holding a knife darted away as I moved toward her. I heard it speak in a broken whisper: ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry. It was never real enough for me.’ Then it was gone and I was alone in the bright merciless light of the bare cold room. I looked down at her face, her shocked eyes, her white blonde hair touching the floor, and I wished that it was

night and I could go back to the city. But I was trapped in the mirrors of her eyes.

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CLEAN LIVING

by Clare Hill

Nobody really knew why the soap had turned red, but there were plenty of guesses. Most were along the lines of a chemical reaction, some sort of manufacturing fault, which made the soap turn red on contact with skin and water. Jessie knew the truth, but no one asked her, being only twelve and all, she wouldn't have the faintest idea about it. That's what they thought, anyway, with the arrogance of adults who have forgotten that they were once children themselves.

It had all been Uncle Marty's idea. 'You have to do it, I can't get away with it. Nobody will ever suspect you, and it's the only way out of this bloody situation that I can see that won't land you in terrible trouble. You don't want to upset your parents, do you? You'd only disappoint them and make them sad, Jess. You know they would blame you, they don't understand, not like I do.'

He was the only person in the whole world who knew how special she was. Mommy and Daddy didn't seem to see it, they were too busy reassuring each other about their respective uniqueness to notice hers. Uncle Marty was different, though, he took the time to really see her as a person instead of just an annoying little kid.

He was looking after her, just like he'd always promised her, and she loved him for that. She was terrified of getting into trou-

ble, she knew that the best way to handle her parents was to be as unobtrusive as possible, do well at school, and not embarrass them in front of their arty friends. So she didn't protest when he gave her the knife, told her what she had to do…

Uncle Marty hadn't warned her about the nightmares that would occur afterwards. The slick of blood haunted her, screamed at her, jumped out on her every time she tried to think about something else. She saw viscous, vicious red everywhere she looked. She smelled it in her food, her mother's frowns at her lack of appetite not enough to entice her into eating.

'Maybe we should take her to the Doctor?' Mommy had whispered to Daddy, when she thought Jessie wasn't listening. Thank God and all the angels; Daddy said he thought it was just a phase, she'd grow out of it.

'There's probably some boy at school she wants to impress,' he laughed, and Mommy laughed, too, as if it was a ridiculous thought, that any boy could be impressed by stupid little Jessie.

She didn't want to see the doctor, he would probe her and prod her, he'd be nice, but she knew that some friendly people weren't friends at all; they just tried to get you into trouble. Like Laura from school, she was always copying off Jessie, and then saying that Jessie had copied her. Nobody believed Jessie, she was always the one to get the blame. So she had stopped protesting, and resigned herself to the weekly trips to the Headmaster's office. Where she mumbled that everything was fine and looked at the floor, so the teacher wouldn't see the tears glistening in her eyes. Life was so unfair. Jessie had known that for some time.

At least Uncle Marty listened to her. But now he had gone away, and she didn't have anyone to talk to, except the dog, and he didn't know what to do any more than she did. So she kept quiet, as the red soap became an amusing anecdote her parents speculated on at dinner parties, their friends coming up with even more outlandish suggestions for the seemingly miraculous event. None of which came close to the truth.

It was the blood, of course. It wouldn't come off her hands, no matter how hard she scrubbed. She started pulling the sleeves of her

baggy jumper down to cover her hands, so no one would see the rawness of her skin. Sometimes they hurt, but that was okay, it was better than that other hurt, the pain inside her. But now Jessie was worried, because the soap was trying to betray her. Calling attention to the blood on her hands.

The adults had all started to worry about Uncle Marty, too. Some big policemen wanted to speak to him, but nobody had been able to find him. It looked as if he'd gone on holiday, but he hadn't told anyone where he was going. Jessie learned a lot from being almost invisible to Mommy and Daddy. Odd looks were being exchanged between her parents while she was there, now, and it made her feel uncomfortable. Then they started to look at her like her brother, Mikey, looked at his bugs. If they had a microscope big enough, would they angle it to burn her with the sun? Maybe if they knew the terrible thing she'd done…

Jessie knew Uncle Marty would be back for her; he was the only one she could trust. He loved her, he'd told her so, and she knew he didn't lie, not to her. He wouldn't leave her here with these people who couldn't understand her. She just had to wait, and hope the soap turned white again. Then things would get back to normal, her parents would stop looking at her strangely, and Uncle Marty would come back. Then they would live happily ever after.

Of course, being only twelve, she hadn't thought much about her method of disposal. Out of her sight was out of her mind. What if it was that way with Uncle Marty, what if he forgot about her, now he couldn't see her? No, he would never do that, she told herself, clutching the pink rabbit that he'd given her close to her chest.

When Daddy went in the freezer to get some ice for their gin and tonics and came out with the plastic box she had secreted behind the frozen chips, she knew she was done for. Its grisly contents made her mother scream. Then everyone looked at Jessie, and she realised that her mommy wasn't the only one who was screaming.

Jessie could hear herself, but she couldn't stop. The pain, once let out, wouldn't go back into its box.

Rather like the unborn foetus wouldn't go back into its makeshift Tupperware coffin now.

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STILL LIFE

by Paul Newman

THE battered bus slowed in a grinding of gears like the coughing of a sick dog, crawling up the baking white dust road and lurching around another hairpin turn. Outside, a bland zoetrope of plaster-fronted houses slipped by mere inches away, bleached into muted pastels under the scourging sun. Ragged dogs lolled panting in every scrap of shade, too hot to be baited by the young children sprawled in lounging, boastful groups. Faces seamed and androgynous with age peered intermittently from dark, cool interiors, emerging into planes of light catching cheekbones, noses and chins before slipping back into shadow.

Stephanie squirmed on the hard vinyl bus seat in discomfort, her thick dark hair clinging in wet snakes to her forehead and back, slow beads of sweat trickling like oil from behind her ears and down between her breasts despite the lightest of cotton tops and a loose skirt. Warbling mariachi filtered over the growing engine from an ancient portable tape player duct-taped to the dashboard and adorned with miniature plaster saints and rosaries, its soulful lament in competition with the dishevelled driver who sang along to a different tune.

The leafy emerald shade of the Jardin de la Reforma felt a lifetime away, with its bustle of vendors hawking juices and tacos and the easy knots of well-dressed middle-class students cutting lec-

tures from the university. Nearly twenty minutes on this suffocating vehicle had taken her out of Guanajuato's picturesque centre, its subterranean roadways and rambling colonial houses stacked up steep slopes giving way to a crumbling squalor of ramshackle plain adobe houses and the occasional cantina. She wriggled again in exasperation at the increasingly slick sensation of her skin and clothes, succeeding only on knocking her sketch pad and case of charcoals to the butt-littered floor.

She stooped to retrieve them as the bus finally bumped to a halt, jerking her forward to clout her head on the seat in front and provoking a strangled moan of frustration. A family from the rear jostled her as they passed in a clipped jabber of Spanish, three young boys tugging at their tardy parents to pick up the pace. Squinting out at against the sun's relentless white glare, Stephanie saw a squat dun building surrounded by trinket stalls and realised her ride was over. With relief, she stepped down onto the cobbled road and massaged her aching buttocks, scuttling under the shade of an awning as she was enveloped in rank violent diesel fumes as the bus belched off back to town.

A lethargic, rat-like stallholder snapped to life, grasping the first item to come to hand and waving it excitedly at her. 'Hey, pretty lady, I make you a good price. A very good price, yes?' She secured her hair in a damp ponytail, tried to block out the decreasing price and escalating volume, and braced herself for the sun.

She sauntered steadily across the courtyard to the building's entrance, below an uninspiring sign declaring it to be the 'Museo de las Momias', bought a ticket and slipped inside.

No guides, no notices, no signs giving background or any other information. Just a long cool corridor with coffin-sized glass windows set three deep and nose-to-tail in the gloom. At the far end, the noisy family from the bus oohed and aahed before turning a corner out of sight.

She leaned to the nearest glass panel and looked at the body within. It was, or rather had been, a man; wispy stubble still clung to his chin along with a few strands of pale hair on his peeling scalp. He may have been fat in life, to judge from the size of his

disintegrating funereal vestments, but death had slimmed him down with greater determination and efficiency than any Sunday supplement fad diet, sinking his cheeks and withering his limbs to cheap ghost train imitations of the real thing. Above him was a woman, curled foetally as far as the confines of the space would allow, the remnants of her winding sheet wrapped tight about her, and below her was a man who could have died at eighteen or eighty, his taut husk of a body rendering the task of putting an age to him both impossible and obsolete.

Clutching her pad to her chest, Stephanie wandered slowly along the dim passageway, her gaze roving over the stacked cadavers laid out in a curious variety of attitudes – calm in repose, spastic and tense, clothed, naked or somewhere in between, some adorned with cheap trinkets, others with grey flowers as withered and dead as those they graced. The corridor turned a corner and led onto another as long again. Jesus wept, how many bodies were in this place? She passed through several small rooms housing what were evidently the prized exhibits, displayed in upright glass cases and wired clumsily to wooden backboards with their feet an inch or so above the ground.

Muted laughter reached her, presumably from the tiresomely jolly family ahead, and was sharply cut off by the muffled bang of a door closing. Nearly at the end. Her drawing materials were clutched tight yet forgotten.

She emerged from another passage of the pigeon-holed dead into a room smaller than the others. A door opposite admitted a razor sliver of sunlight at the ground, a draught moving fine dust from the stone floor in delicate swirls and eddies. This chamber held just one exhibit, free-standing in a corner. Before it stood a man, grey and stooped by the burden of his years, his black three-piece suit crumpled and of a cut not in fashion for three decades or more. His hands were clasped before him, his manner reverential, but his eyes focused unblinking on the corpse upright before him. After several still minutes he turned and glanced at Stephanie, looked once more to the exhibit and left by the door, briefly framed in the hard light and gone as quickly. She was about to follow him,

relishing the prospect of an ice-cold beer to wash away the dust and odd stale cinnamon scent of the place, but instead felt an irresistible pull towards the glass case.

In it was a woman, possibly once beautiful although it was hard to tell now. Her skin appeared dry and vulnerable as crumpled onion skin paper and a mane of dark hair hung to her waist in luxurious, incongruous contrast. Garments that might once have been fine silk were now reduced to a few rotting gossamer threads in places and hung like limp rags in others. One foot bore a delicate high-heeled shoe, the other was bare. About her neck was a simple silver locket, tarnished and hanging partly open. But it was her face which commanded unwavering attention, finely sculpted cheekbones framing eyelids so thickly lashed she appeared almost sensuous, her dry grey mouth locked in a rictus of perfect white teeth. Without looking away, Stephanie raised her pad to balance it on her left forearm, pulled a charcoal from the slim case gripped awkwardly in the same hand and began to sketch.

Harsh dark lines scored across the heavy paper in a blur, jagged blocks of shading smudged and smeared into softness

(rip)

delicate traceries building up the fine features, each hair in place

(rip)

stylised geometric shapes woven into eyes, nose, mouth

(rip)

gentle strokes added –

– a touch on her bare shoulder and she gasped, nearly screamed. 'Senorita, I am sorry, but the museo closes soon, yes?' She stood dazed in a snowdrift of paper, her right hand blackened and aching, and bent to gather her work. The intruder was the heavy-set cashier who had issued her ticket.

'You are Americano, yes?'

'No, from England'. He looked confused so Stephanie tried again. 'England? Y'know, London?'

'Ah, London, yes. Some day I would go there …'

'Believe me, you haven't missed anything.'

He took her hand and helped her up from her crouch, glancing perhaps a little obviously at her unadorned ring finger as he did so. 'You are not married?'

She bristled inside, images flickering from her memory of Michael and of the fights, rages and betrayals from which she'd fled. 'No.' Stonily.

The man pondered this for a second. 'And what do you think of our famous little museo? Los muertos, ah, the dead, they do not scare you?'

'No. Well, perhaps just a little.' She grinned self-consciously. 'How did they come to be here?'

The man smoothed down his impressive moustache three times with the splayed thumb and forefinger of his right hand, wet his lips and slipped into what was evidently a fairly familiar patter. 'In 1896, when the poor people here could not pay the rent on the graves of their loved ones, the town dug them up so it could rent the plots out to others. To others who would pay. This was a very poor town, then, you understand?

'But when they had dug up the first ones they found them like this because of something in the ground – salts, minerales – in the soil, yes? Word got around, as it will in small places, and soon people were coming from all over the Bajio to see them. They were happy to pay some small amount for admission and the town officials saw they could make some money … and so they kept on digging up the bodies.'

He moved closer, his voice dropped to a whisper. 'But we found not all had died peacefully, you understand. Some …' he indicated the body before them '… had been buried before their time, by accident, and nobody knew until their families fell behind on rents and they were taken up.' He stood back with a grim flourish and a touch of the theatricals played around his widened eyes.

Stephanie looked at the body again, felt her surroundings fade as she again lost herself pondering the face frozen forever in its silent scream, the dry slugs left of eyeballs just apparent under the lashes, and had to pull herself back with an effort. 'That's terrible.'

He nodded ruefully, a gesture at odds with a minute grimace

suggesting it was really no big deal. 'But you see, this is Mexico. We look at things a little different here. Death, if not a friend in every house, is at least a regular guest at most of them. Perhaps it is best to be on good terms with him? It will not make us so sad, then, when he comes calling, eh?'

Stephanie tugged her gaze from the hypnotic face of the exhibit to shoot him a sceptical look.

'No, no, it is true,' he insisted. 'Did you see an old man in this room before?'

'Yes, I did. What of him?'

'Fifty years ago or more, he was not so old and he was married to the most beautiful woman in this town. They were happy like in the stories and movies but then one day she grew suddenly sick and died. She was buried and his grief did not have a limit. But the town was still making money in its museo and he was still poor. The first time he could not find the money to make the rent on her grave was all the excuse the officials needed to dig her up and put her here, as you can see.'

He rapped the glass gently.

'Her husband saw she had been buried alive and almost went mad at the thought of her trapped in her grave, desperate, dying a second time. But every day since she went on show, he has been a visitor – the town allows him admission without paying. He loves her very much, I think, and how many men and women who have been together for half a century can say as much? So maybe death is not such a terrible thing.'

He stopped and looked at her with an appeal clear on his features. Stephanie was puzzled, then the penny dropped and she fumbled in the battered suede pouch strung around her neck and hanging low on her hip, pulled out a crumbled thousand pesos note and handed it over. 'Thanks. For your time. And for the story.'

'Ah, my many thanks, senorita. But I really must close up the front door now. You may stay a few moments longer if you wish.' He stepped smartly away and disappeared into the dim, musky passages.

Just one last one. She flipped open her pad to a virgin sheet,

right hand moving the charcoal in firm, assured sweeps, glancing up at the cadaver's face every few seconds, the looks growing longer as the spaces between them diminished. The body still had the uncanny appearance of peeking from beneath its lashes. Stephanie drank down every detail. Her papers fell from her hand and rustled to the floor unnoticed. Her eyelids drooped and her limbs felt numb with fatigue save for a slight tugging in the pit of her stomach which grew steadily in intensity. Her sight was a blur, images and colours swimming into an uncertain pool. She tried to shake her head but could not, nor move her hands to her face. In panic, she strained to clear her vision and looked out.

Surprise mingled with confusion before both gave way to shock. She was staring at herself, at her body running hands sensuously over bare surfaces, her stomach, hips, cupping her breasts, combing through her hair, tentatively exploring her face. She tried to cry out and found her throat paralysed, her limbs and body immoveable. Not even her eyes would close fully, or open more than a slit. A dry scent of mildew and cinnamon was everywhere.

Her attention was drawn as the door to the outer world swung wide to admit the soft amber sunlight of late afternoon and the old man in his threadbare vintage suit. Stephanie saw her body turn from its sybaritic self-examination towards him, their gazes held long and warm before they seized each other in a strong embrace.

Her body threw her a final glance before it left and in that instant she saw the other behind her eyes and howled in silence.

She was screaming still when the cashier returned ten minutes later and tutted at the litter of papers on the floor. He held up the best of them before her face, pressing it flat against the glass.

'What do you think, eh? She got your look good.'

He chuckled and left, nonchalantly flipping off the lights and locking the door behind him.

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SEPARATION

by Charles Black

Ten years we've been married. It was our wedding anniversary just yesterday. Okay we've had our ups and downs, but that's normal; all marriages have those.

Hell, ten years, that's a long time. You don't get many marriages that last as long as that these days. Don't even get married most of them nowadays, do they?

Ten years and I've been faithful; well mainly. There was that thing with Sheryl, but that didn't last that long, and that was a mistake, and anyway it didn't mean anything.

And Tracy at that works Christmas party, but that was nothing, just one of those drunken one night stands. Everyone has one of those, don't they? So that doesn't really count, does it?

So it's our tenth wedding anniversary, and I take her out to a fancy restaurant for a slap up meal, buy her flowers, and an expensive gold necklace, to celebrate.

I mean how many other blokes would bother with all that? How many other blokes would even remember their wedding anniversary I ask you?

And what does she give me? The shock of a lifetime that's what.

She just lays it on me. She says she, 'thinks we should think about a trial separation. We need to spend some time apart.'

Just like that, out of the blue, no warning. I couldn't believe it. Gobsmacked I were.

Okay so it's not like when we were first married. And maybe the rows are a bit more frequent, and the sex a bit less frequent, but we still love each other don't we?

But I've been thinking about it. And I think she's having an affair, that's what it is. Bloody cheating cow.

I mean it stands to reason don't it? That's why we don't have sex so often - she's getting it somewhere else, isn't she?

I mean she can't really have a headache every Tuesday and Thursday can she?

So she wants a trial separation does she? Wants to spend time apart, does she? Very well, if that's what she wants, that's what I'll give her. Then we'll see how she likes spending time apart.

That's why I've got this butchers cleaver. Bloody cheating cow.

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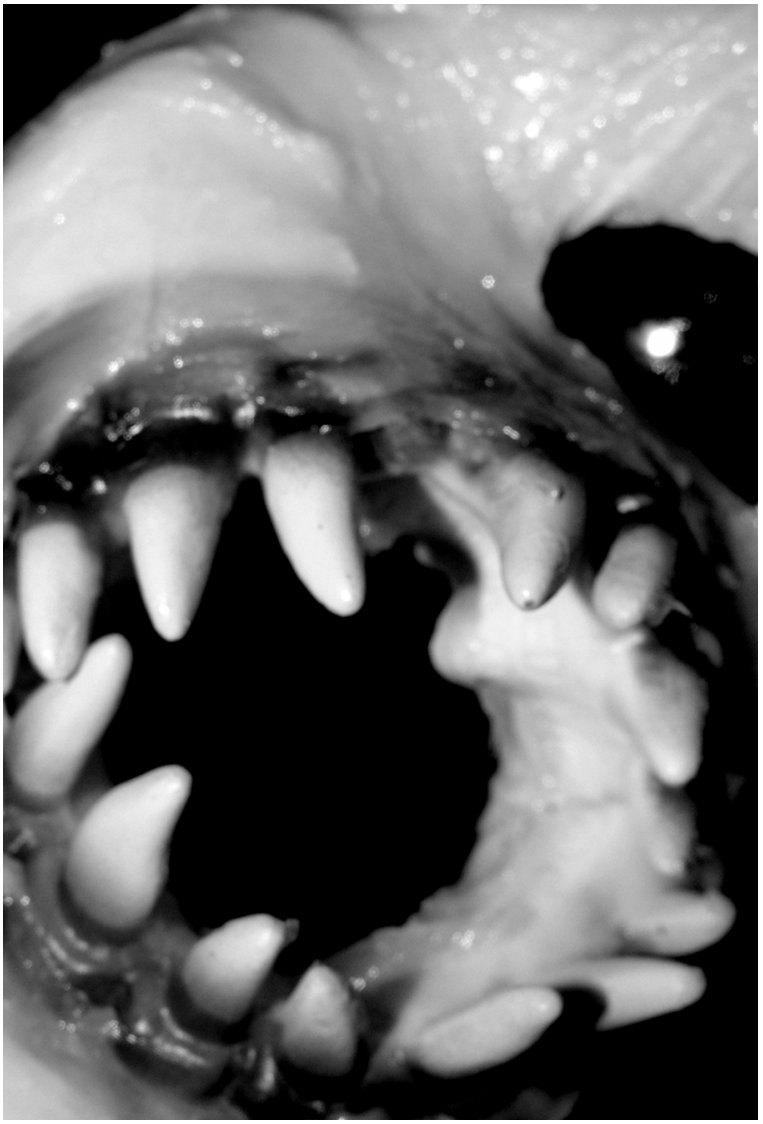

YOU CAN'T SING, YOU CAN'T DANCE, YOU LOOK AWFUL. YOU'LL GO A LONG WAY

by Christopher Wood

How dare they! How bloody dare they! Sitting there in front of him like three… bloody… well, something shit that there were three of. Monkeys. Yeah, three bloody monkeys, sitting there, being shit and looking at him like *he* was shit, like he couldn't sing. Telling him he couldn't sing. Sitting there, the three of them, and telling him, telling *him*, that he couldn't sing.

He couldn't believe it. How bloody *dare* they!

Not that he was sad about this. Oh, he'd cried for the cameras, of course, but that was just for show. Just because that was what people did, when they'd been humiliated by those three shits, with their smug smiles on their smug, fat faces. The three of them sitting there like Lord God Almighty, except three of Him. I mean, okay, maybe he wasn't Robbie Williams, but who was? Not even Robbie Williams, these days. So perhaps he shouldn't have chosen *Angels* to sing, but everyone said he did it so well.

Six hours he'd been waiting in that sodding hotel lobby. Six bloody *hours*, just for the chance of singing 30 seconds of *Angels* to three shits sitting there, silent, in front of him. He'd thought he'd done okay. He *had* done okay. It was bloody hard to sing *Angels* with no backing track, surely they knew that? Okay, so he'd missed

a couple of the high notes, and his voice had cracked about half way through. But that was no excuse for her to start giggling at him, like he was some kind of sad case nobody who couldn't sing properly. He'd expected a hard time from them, the two men – he wasn't Westlife enough for the Irish one and he wasn't female enough for the scary one. But he'd expected more from her. She usually liked the cute boys. And he *was* cute. Everyone said so. Cute and could sing. A bloody shoe-in, surely? Apparently not.

He kicked out at a nearby lamppost in frustration. God, he was angry. But not sad, oh no. Those tears, they'd just been for show, for the cameras. Although even he had been surprised at the power of his impassioned pleas to the three of them, as they sat there, blank-eyed in front of him after delivering their damning verdict. He hadn't expected an easy ride, but he'd at least thought he'd get through to the next round, on the strength of his looks alone. But apparently not.

It was only as he'd finished, as the last word died on his lips, that he'd actually noticed her shoulders moving up and down. Her mouth was hidden behind her hand, but it was pretty obvious she was laughing. At him! The two men were just sitting there, stony faced. His eyes moved from one to the other, and he forced his cheek muscles to pull his mouth into an approximation of a grin. Look confident! Ignore the old witch! The other two aren't laughing. Perhaps she's still laughing at the last singer, that fat girl with the low cut top and the pink hair. Yes, that must be it. He'd been quite happy when he'd seen her in front of him in the queue. After watching Waynetta Slob thunder around the room as she destroyed *Crazy In Love* (he'd heard her practising), they'd be ready for a bit of class – a good looking boy who could sing a bit. He didn't just have the 'X-Factor', he had the 'Y' and 'Z' as well. Oh yes, he'd got his little speech all worked out.

The Irish one had playfully punched the witch on the arm and she'd slowly stopped giggling, wafting her eyes with her hands. It had felt like hours since he had stopped singing. Even then, he'd still felt confident, that they'd say 'Well, that wasn't great, but we'd like to work with you', or 'Bad choice of song, but I like you'.

The lights in the room were hot. He remembered feeling the material of his new shirt sticking to his back, a dribble of sweat running out of his gelled hair and down the side of his forehead. Still silence. They were obviously overawed by his talent, formulating what to say. Hope had risen in his chest. His smile had broadened slightly. Then the scary one had cleared his throat, and said two words.

'Get out.'

Things had gone a bit hazy then. He remembered standing there, looking at the other two, waiting for further comment. But there had been nothing. Unless you counted further giggling as comment. He remembered asking 'is that it?' and looking round at the other people in the room – the camera operators, a couple of people with clipboards, more than he'd expected, actually, and completely invisible to him up to that point. No-one had said anything. He started to babble then. He'd promised himself he wouldn't, that he wasn't like those no-hopers you always saw on this show who said things like 'just give me a chance' and 'singing is my life, you can't take it away from me'. He was better than that, he'd said to his mum before leaving for the train that morning. Whatever they said, he'd take it with a quiet dignity. He was a singer, a talent, not a fame-crazed wannabe. If they decided it wasn't the right time for him, that was okay.

'Just give me a chance!' he had cried, tears pouring down his cheeks. 'Singing is my life! *You can't take it away from me*!'

He remembered rushing towards their table, begging them to let him sing another song (although even then part of his brain had been trying to tell him that he didn't actually *know* any other songs), then being grabbed from behind, a brawny forearm reaching across his throat, actually choking him (he'd sue) as he was pulled away from the three of them, seeing through a veil of hot tears that now all three were in hysterics. As he'd been pulled through the door and out into the corridor he had heard himself screaming his final words to them. 'Please! I just want to be famous!'

Shits, the lot of them. That dizzy blonde bird who usually gave

people a consoling hug wasn't even outside to ask him how it went. Not that he'd have been able to tell her, with King Kong maintaining an unmoveable grip on his windpipe. The next thing he'd known he was out in the cold wet rain, the pressure on his throat had been released and he was facing the back door of the theatre. He'd gone back round to the front, determined to find out what was going on, but the people on the door with the clipboards and the Bluetooth headsets wouldn't let him back in.

So now here he was, walking along a street in a strange city, his mind racing, his cheeks burning and his foot aching from its contact with the unyielding lamppost. What the hell had happened? All he'd done was try to convince them that he was what they were looking for, and they hadn't even let him pour his heart out on camera in that little booth thingy. It was so unfair. Life was unfair. All he wanted to do was be on the telly. That and attend premieres, get let into exclusive clubs and shag someone out of Girls Aloud. Was that too much to ask? So what if he couldn't bloody sing?

'Gaaaaah!' he shouted at no-one in particular, lifting his face up to the sky and letting the rain fall onto it, his arms outstretched in what he hoped was a pretty cool-looking pose. If only someone was watching! If they could only see his pain, they'd see how dedicated he was to being a celebrity!

'Excuse me, son.'

He'd been so wrapped up in reliving his recent humiliation that he hadn't heard, let alone seen, the car pull up alongside him. And it wasn't the kind of car you didn't notice. A gleaming black American limousine, just the kind that movie stars and pop singers wafted around town in. And pop promoters. As his arms fell to his sides, his hopes lifted.

'Yeah, you,' the voice said. 'Wipe that dopey look off your face and come over here.'

It was a gruff-sounding voice, East London if he was any judge. The driver's window was wound down but the owner's face was hidden by the shadows within. The firmly-shut window of the back door was darkened glass. He could see himself reflected in it. Face pale, look on it dopey.

'I said *come here*! Bloody hell.'

The voice sounded vaguely angry this time, and he took a step forward towards the car, bending down as he did so to try and catch a glimpse of the driver. He could hear the motors of the windscreen wipers as they flicked away the drizzling rain.

'That's better,' said the voice, and its owner leant forward out of the shadows of the car's interior. If he'd had to describe what he thought the man would look like just from his voice, he would have got it spot-on. Large tinted glasses balanced on a sausage roll nose. Jowelled, care-worn face. Thick neck squeezed into a buttoned-up collar, round which a thin black tie was done up to ten. Massive shoulders that made the car's leather seat squeal as the driver shifted his bulk.

'Not a singer, then?' The driver smiled, giving a flash of gold tooth. 'Ah, well. You can't win 'em all. But it's not all about singing, is it? What's your name, son?'

'Terry,' said Terry. The rain was turning from drizzle into proper droplets, he could feel the cold water hitting his exposed head. His hair was going to look crap.

'Well, Terry.' Another smile, another flash of gold. 'Like I said, it's not all about singing, is it? I mean, for a young, good-looking lad like you there's all kinds of openings available.'

Something clicked in Terry's head, and he let out a moan of disappointment. 'Oh, look… I'm not into that kind of thing. Sorry.' Why was he apologising?

The driver barked a laugh. 'I'm not a facking shirtlifter, you daft twat! Do I look like the sort of bloke who takes it up the Gary?'

Terry gave a non-committal grunt. This bloke looked exactly like the sort who 'took it up the Gary' to him. They all did it in prison, didn't they? Still, thank God the enormous man didn't seem to have taken offence.

'Fack me, and that's not an offer, Tel, I think I'm going to have to change my pitch here. Every single time I do it you kids think I'm after a gobble. Filthy minds, the lot of you. No, I'm not after your body, Tel, I'm here to offer you a chance at the big time.

You're just the kind of person we're after.'

Terry swayed back on his heels. He could actually feel his heart soaring in his chest. 'You… you're from the TV company? I've got a second chance?'

The man's eyes were obscured behind the pearlescence of his glasses, but his mouth curled into a smile again. Terry looked from his face to the impenetrable black of the window, trying to see in to the back seat.

'Oh. My. God. I knew it! I fucking knew it! He's in there, isn't he? I knew my singing wasn't that bad! It was some kind of test, wasn't it? And now you know how much I want it! The bloody X Factor! I've not just got that, I've got the Y and Z Factor as well! Is there a camera in there? Hello, mum! I did it! I told you I would! I knew it! 'Get out!' Ha! Great joke, that! This is some kind of 'evil' version, isn't it? Like Big Brother the other year – you've changed the rules. I bet that means all the people who thought they'd got through haven't at all, have they? *Suckers*.'

The driver flicked a switch and from deep inside the rear door there was an expensive sounding 'clunk'.

'Yeah, well, I take it you're interested then, Tel? Jump in.'

Terry grabbed the chrome door handle and pulled it up, sliding onto the cream leather seat before he'd had time to register that there was actually no-one else sitting in the rear of the car. The heavy door closed almost silently next to him, swinging shut under its own considerable weight, and he was cocooned in leather, walnut and glass.

'Oh.' said Terry, to no-one in particular. The back seat was separated from the front by yet more opaque black glass, through which he could just make out the driver's bulk as he shifted in his seat. A loudspeaker in the roof above his head fizzed into life.

'Now you just sit tight, Tel, and we'll be on our way. Put your seatbelt on, will you?'

It had taken Terry a couple of minutes to find the hidden camera, a convex piece of glass next to the loudspeaker which had been cunningly made to look like a light fitting of some kind. With no

further input from his driver, he'd taken the decision to do what everyone seemed to do on these programmes whilst being driven somewhere in a flash car, and begun to talk. So wrapped up in telling the world how happy he was to have been picked was Terry that he'd forgotten he was even in a car moving through rainy Manchester, so when it stopped it came as quite a surprise to him.

They'd driven up a back alley behind a row of shops. The half concrete, half brick walls were punctuated with the occasional windowless door, but little else apart from the occasional downpipe or expelair. It was still raining and the street outside was peppered with soggy newspapers and waterlogged chip wrappers. It didn't look very prime time telly, thought Terry, but maybe that was the point.

Terry tapped on the glass which separated him from the driver. 'Is this it? Are we here?'

If the driver heard him, he didn't show it. The shadowy figure remained implacably still in the front seat. Terry looked up straight into the hidden camera lens that looked like a courtesy light and mustered the biggest, most confident grin he could.

'I think this must be it! We're here! Ah well, here goes nothing! Look out world, here comes Terry!'

There was a clunk from deep within the door next to him, which made him start slightly. He hadn't been aware he'd been *locked in* during the journey. Ah well, he reasoned – they couldn't be too careful. Some lesser entrant might try to get into the car if they sussed what was going on. It all made perfect sense. He pulled on the thick chrome handle and the door popped ajar, letting a gust of cold air in. With a last look at the camera (which he reckoned was a perfect mixture of cautious optimism and cheeky charm with a pinch of smoulder) he made his exit.

'Fuck.' The rain was heavier, and colder, than he'd expected. There was no-one there to greet him with an umbrella, which was a bit of a let-down. He looked up and down the alley, but they seemed to be alone. All the doors looked firmly shut – all, in fact, looked like they hadn't been opened for a long time. A scrawl on

the nearest informed him that 'Westlife is gay'. He turned back to the car and knocked on the driver's window. It took a good few second for anything to happen, then, almost silently, it descended a couple of inches.

'What?' came the driver's voice from the darkness.

Terry was stumped. Was this some kind of initiative test? 'Er, hi. Again.' He giggled, nervously.

Silence.

He leant a bit closer, trying to make out the driver. The light was beginning to fail and the colour was draining from the surroundings. He could feel droplets running down his neck. 'What happens now? I mean, we're here, aren't we? This is the back of the studio, right? But I don't want to do anything wrong. I'm probably being thick, but…'

'Through that door, Tel. The one nearest you.' Terry breathed a sight of relief. Everything was still okay. He turned, took in a deep breath, ran a hand through his now-soaked hair and stepped forward. The door, the Westlife one, was painted a dull grey and didn't have a handle. He put a hand to a reasonably clean bit and pushed. It swung open, bright white light spilling out into the twilit outdoors.

With one hand up to his eyes to shield them from the brightness, Terry stepped inside. This was more like it. These must be the bright lights they were always going on about on the telly. It all made sense. As his eyes adjusted he saw that he was in a short corridor lined with white painted brick. The brilliance was coming from a series of industrial-looking lights in ceiling above him. A couple of steps ahead was another door, this one made of metal with a large handle. Behind him the door swung shut with a click.

To Terry, it was like coming home. He'd seen this scenario played out on a hundred different occasions – new guy turns up at the house, or farm, or jungle, and waits to be introduced to the others. There must be a rehearsal room on the other side of that second door, with the people he was going to perform against in there, all as puzzled as him as to what was going on. But he'd have the drop on them, cos he'd figured it out! Those thick bastards would be

shuffling around wondering what the hell had happened, while he'd be the alpha male, the king bee, the one who knew. He'd be able to take the ones he liked to one side and say 'I've got it all figured out,' and they'd love him for it. Oh, the audience would think he was a bit arrogant, spoiling their fun a bit, but they'd come to love him as 'the intelligent one'.

'That Terry,' they'd say, over their cups of morning tea in the office or supping their pints in the pub, 'he knows his shit. They can't pull the wool over that guy's head. He's not just a singer, he's clever, too. The next Will Young, he is.' Terry thought for a moment, and added to this fictional conversation: 'Except not a bender, obviously.' Yes, that would go without saying. Although he'd prefer it if they *did* say it.

Now, he thought. What did people say during moments like this? Ah yes…

Terry strode forward and grabbed the door handle. 'OhmyGod, ohmyGod, ohmyGod.'

It pulled down with ease and the door opened inwards. Whatever was beyond it was surprisingly dark. Confidence is the best policy, thought Terry, the new god of Saturday evening telly, and he strode in manfully.

The door swung shut behind him with a metallic clang and for a second, everything was black. Then with an electric buzz, fluorescent lights flickered into life and threw his new surroundings into stark, if slightly yellowy, relief. His last 'ohmyGod' died in his throat.

His first thought was that it wasn't a rehearsal room. His second was that it wasn't a television studio, the Big Brother house, Gordon Ramsay's kitchen or the Australian outback. His third was that the girl slumped against the far wall appeared to be dead.

Terry could feel his heartbeat thumping in his head as he looked around him, trying to pinpoint the cameras. The room was small, about ten feet square, with a red painted concrete floor and white painted breezeblock walls. Apart from the door behind him, the only break in the walls was a metal grill, about two feet square,

at ground level in the wall to his left. *That* couldn't be the camera, could it? Other than that, there was just the girl. She was sitting with her back against the wall, one leg bent under the other. Her head was down against her chest, her curly blonde hair falling forward and obscuring her face. One arm was folded, her hand curled in her lap. The other arm was limp at her side, the hand resting on the floor by her foot, palm upwards. She was wearing a vest top and three-quarter length jeans, but her feet were bare, the soles black with dirt. Even at first glance Terry saw that her skin was deathly pale under the flickering lights. A purple bruise stained the skin at the crook of her forearm.

Surmising that in the absence of any mirrors, the only place the cameras could be was in the lights somehow, Terry looked up towards the ceiling. 'Okay, what am I supposed to do now? This is a bit fucking weird, isn't it? I mean – has anyone checked to see if she's okay? Perhaps *I* could check if she's okay? Yeah, of course. It's down to me, isn't it? Some kind of weird joke. I'm onto you, you know!'

He tapped his nose with his finger and smiled for the cameras. God, reality TV was getting *weird* these days. Still, they had to move with the times, the audience wasn't going to be happy with just Big Brother or just X Factor, they'd want something different. Something that combined the two, perhaps. With a bit of weirdness thrown in, like this. Yes, it all made sense. The girl needed help, and he had to show that he knew what he was doing! Never mind singing, this could lead to all kinds of stuff – a walk-on part in Holby City, or something. A whole load of new thoughts crammed themselves into his already-racing brain. He'd seen enough of this stuff to know that the makers loved freaking people out. The audience would be lapping this up – the talent show auditionee freaking out in this strange situation. But if he proved himself, if he showed he *couldn't* be freaked out, they'd love him for it. Even more than they would have done if he'd been the one to figure out the stuff he'd made up while out in the corridor! God, he'd never realised how bloody intelligent he was until these last few minutes! He was wiping the *floor* with these people, always one step ahead!

He walked over to the prone figure, and knelt down in front of her. 'Hello? Hello? I'm Terry. Who are you?'

Blimey. Up close she really *did* look dead. It was amazing what they could do with make-up these days. Although perhaps it wasn't make-up at all - that bruise surrounded what looked suspiciously like a needle mark. She was a junkie, obviously. A bloody junkie who'd come in just before him, and then passed out on the floor. They'd put *anyone* on the telly these days, the more fucked up the better. And what was more, this gave him a problem. Cos if she could sing, and was prepared to fight her addiction as well, she'd have such an advantage. The great British public loved someone from the wrong side of the tracks who managed to turn their life around. She'd got a drug addiction – the *bitch*! What could he do? Start smoking and then give that up? Pretend to have a drinking problem? Oh *why* had he had such a comfortable, middle class upbringing? It was all his mother's fault, the cow. She could at least have *hit* him occasionally. Then it occurred to him. What was better than a recovering drug addict? Well, what about the thoughtful, caring *friend* of a recovering drug addict? The uncomplaining one who put up with all the shit, the one who listened to the screaming and the tantrums, who locked them in their room for their own good and then hugged them when it was all over. *He* could be that friend!

He touched her arm. Her skin felt cold and spongy. He prodded her. 'Hey. Hey, wake up. It's okay, I can help.'

He looked up at the camera. 'She's out for the count. Poor girl.'

As he looked away she slumped to the side. He turned and caught her before her head connected with the concrete floor, and laid her down. Well, she wasn't dead, he could feel a pulse in her neck. And now he could see her face, and she was quite fit, which was a bonus. All this week in the Sun, TV star Terry tells how he saved his girl from her drugs hell, and about their plans to mar-

His thoughts were interrupted by a metallic scraping coming from his left. He turned and saw that the floor-level grate was swinging inwards, revealing a square of blackness. More weird-

ness. What was he supposed to do, crawl into it? No chance. He was skinny, but not that thin. If anyone was going to do that, it was her, when she'd woken up. But it wouldn't hurt to have a look. There was probably another camera in there, he could get a nice big close-up. He crawled forward on his hands and knees, the concrete cold, even through his denim.

'Hello? Is there anyone in there? Is that you, Louie?'

Oh, Simon would like that one. And Simon was the one to impress, everyone knew that. The hole was pitch, he couldn't see a camera in there. Then again, he couldn't *not* see one, either. He leant closer. 'Hello? If there is someone in there, how about some booze? Or something to eat? I'm star-'

From the hole came a wet thud. Then a slithering sound. The blackness seemed to expand in front of him, almost pulling him towards the hole. Terry felt a wave of unexplainable fear wash over him.

'Hey, what is this?'

A ticking noise, Another thud. The sound of something being pulled along concrete. Something damp, and soft.

A vision of Paul Burrell putting his hand into a hole to feel unseen terrors jumped into his mind with appalling clarity. The man had looked such a twat. Was that what they wanted *him* to do?

More scraping sounds. And then, a low moan. Terry felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, and he shuffled backwards, not taking his eyes off the inky square, kicking himself across the floor with his feet, past the prone form of the girl until his back connected with the wall opposite the grate. Whatever *that* was, it wasn't a snake, or a rat, or a fuck-off spider. That sounded almost human! Almost.

Shaking now, but unsure why, he stared into the hole. It looked like something was moving in there – he could see something grey against the blackness now. He tried to make his eyes focus harder on the indistinct blur, but he couldn't make anything out. The noises were getting louder now, more insistent. He looked from the hole to the girl and back to the hole. She was about half the distance away he was, and she was unconscious. If there was a rat or a spi-

der in there, it might go for her *first*. Perhaps he ought to grab her, move her away from it? Then again, if there was a *rat* or *spider* in there, it might go for *her* first. Remembering the cameras, and that this was telly, he looked up at the lights in the ceiling. 'Hey! This isn't funny any more! I didn't sign up for this!'

He hadn't signed up for *anything* yet, which was a bit odd, now he came to think about it. He looked back at the hole – yes, there was definitely something moving in there, a grey blob just beyond the limit of the shadows, pulling itself towards him. He could hear something grunting, and then another moan – louder this time. Whatever was coming, it sounded like it was in pain.

Then, with appalling suddenness, the thing that had been making its way towards him pulled itself free of the hole and half slipped, half spewed onto the floor of the room. Terry tried to cry out but the sound got trapped in his throat. He pressed himself back against the concrete as hard as he could as the thing continued to pull itself free of the cavity until it lay before him, pale, translucent skin wet and shining in the harsh glare from the lights. It was about the size of a man, but that was where any similarity ended. It looked to Terry like someone had taken a jumble of off-cuts from a butchers' slab and wrapped them in cling-film – through the pink-grey skin he could see organs half-filled with viscous liquid, bones and gristle pushing and pulsating as the thing rolled around on the floor. Something that looked like the remnants of an arm, with three protuberances that might have been fingers, was flailing about, as if trying to grab at the air. At one end what may have been a head was lifting itself up from the floor and then falling with a crack onto the hard concrete. A single black eye the size of a golf ball rolled in a scarlet circle of raw meat, and a jaw with a layer of tiny, sharp teeth worked itself backwards and forwards beneath as the creature sucked in air. Terry could feel bile rising in his throat as it thrashed around on the floor, spraying blood-flecked mucus across the concrete. Then the three-fingered hand touched the outstretched arm of the girl.

The effect was astonishing. The thing bucked like an electric charge had shot through it, and as it did so, it grasped the girl's

forearm, hard. Terry could see her grey skin whiten under the pressure from the three digits. And then what must have been muscles in the creature's 'arm' flexed and it hauled itself across the concrete towards her, leaving a raw scarlet smear in its wake. Not letting go of its prize, the creature's head turned in his direction, the black eye swivelling round in its ruined socket to look

Straight

At

Him.

Looking *at* the thing was bad enough, but to be looked at *by* it was worse. Terry could feel the warmth being sucked from his body as its blank, inhuman gaze sized him up. Through the translucent skin beneath the orb he could see pink muscles tighten, pulling the membrane around the jawbone into folds. Was it *smiling* at him?

Cold as he had become, he suddenly felt a patch of heat between his thighs, which quickly spread down towards his knees. Forcing himself to break eye contact with the monster he looked down at his crotch and groaned. A pool of liquid had appeared between his legs. He'd pissed himself. In front of the cameras!

The thing hauled itself closer to the still-unconscious girl, never releasing its grip on her for a moment. Its head was now close enough to nuzzle her neck, its body pressing against her left breast, a pink stain spreading across the white material of her vest where they touched. Terry blinked back tears from his eyes. He had to do something! There had to be something he could do to redeem himself in the eyes of the audience at home, he didn't want to be known as 'the incontinent one'! He pushed himself back against the wall and hauled himself to his feet, the rough surface scraping the skin of his back through his t-shirt. He could smell the urine now, and the shame of it spurred him into action. Without a thought for his own safety, he ran to the door and started pummelling it with his fists.

'Let us out! Let us out! There's a fucking monster in here!'

He reached down to grab the handle, but there was nothing there. He tried to dig his fingernails into the space between the door and the frame to lever it open, but the space wasn't wide enough

and the door wouldn't budge. Tears now flowing down his cheeks he turned so his back was against the door. The monster hadn't moved much – its body was heaving as if recovering from its exertions. Terry looked around wildly – there was still nothing in the room that looked like it would be of any help. The grate was open to his left, but could he make it there before the creature got him? It had moved pretty fast when it had come out. And what if he got jammed in the hole? An image of his legs frantically kicking at empty space jumped into his head, being watched by millions on GMTV – the boy who wet himself and then got stuck in a hole.

He felt anger rising through his body. He hadn't come this far to fail now, at the last hurdle! He had to do this for the cameras, for his future career, for his fans, and probably for the girl lying on the floor at the mercy of this creature, too. Something snapped inside him and he staggered across to the creature, grabbing it under where he imagined its armpits must be, prepared to haul it backwards and away from its victim.

It was like he'd stuck his hands into a pan of boiling water. He'd been stung by a jellyfish once, on holiday in the Mediterranean, but that pain was nothing compared to this. Bolts of jagged agony shot through his fingers where they made contact with the thing's skin, and as he snatched them away he saw pink welts already forming on his hand. He held his throbbing hands in front of him and saw that within seconds, the skin had blistered and the blisters themselves had begun to split, dots of scarlet blood already beginning to appear. The pain swirling through his brain found his anger and without thinking he launched a vicious kick at the side of the thing in front of him.

His foot sank into the creature's midriff, and he felt something crack. With a pathetic mewing sound, it released its grip on the girl and fell away from her onto the floor. Terry delivered another kick and watched with pleasure as it curled in on itself, its one arm feebly flailing around in the air above it as if trying to ward him off. He moved closer and this time stamped down hard on the creature's head, grunting with satisfaction as he felt something pop under the heel of his trainer. Again and again he brought his foot

down, until the arm flopped to the floor and his foot was connecting with the concrete beneath it. Terry stopped and looked down at the mess where the creature's head had been, gagged and wretched as his hamburger and fries from lunch made a reappearance.

His hands were a symphony of raw agony, but he could feel a buzz of adrenaline coursing through his brain, the endorphins his attack had released giving him a boost which helped push the pain away. He looked back up at the ceiling. 'There! I fucking did it! Now what?'

Still there was nothing. No booming voice telling him he'd passed this task, no fanfare, no loud bell or clunk as the door was released. Just the faint buzz of the lights.

Then a low moan, coming from the floor in front of him.

Terry jumped backwards as if he'd been stung again. Surely the creature couldn't still be alive? But the sound hadn't come from its ruined body.

It was the girl.

Her hand lifted from the concrete and then flopped down again, and one eye peered up at him through her funky blonde fringe. She blinked and then tried to raise her body from the cold concrete, pain etching across her face as she felt the sting in her arm from the creature's touch. Now in a sitting position, she looked around the room, her brow knitted in confusion, before her eyes met Terry's again.

There's no getting away from it, he thought, she really is quite fit. And he'd just saved her life!

Keen for her to know this small but vital nugget of information, Terry stepped forward and crouched in front of her, ignoring the clammy wetness of his jeans as they pulled against his legs.

'Hi,' he said. 'I'm Terry. Are you okay?'

She looked straight at him, then her eyes darted to the jellied carcass splattered across the floor next to him, and a shadow crossed her features.

'Yes,' she replied in a shaky, small voice. 'I… think so. Can you help me up?'

Terry reached across and grabbed her under the armpits, sup-

pressing a squeal as the nerve endings in his palms told him he'd apparently just plunged his hands into a bucket of broken glass. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he helped her to her feet. She swayed slightly, catching his arm to keep her balance.

He resisted the urge to dance a jig whilst blowing on his hands to cool them down. 'This is all a bit weird, isn't it?' he said, feeling that the audience would lose interest if someone didn't say *something*, however inane and obvious. 'How long have you been here? When did they get you? What's your name? I'm Terry, by the way.'

Her strength returning, she released his arm, and held her hand up in front of her face, looking at the slender fingers and the manicured nails.

'Dainty.' She whispered.

'Nice name,' said Terry. The girl was obviously still off her tits. 'Is it short for anything?'

She met his gaze again. There was a strange look in her eyes. A blank emptiness that sparked a vague feeling of recognition somewhere at the back of his mind.

She stepped towards him, her breasts now grazing his chest. He could feel her warm breath on his lips. 'That's not my name.'

Terry's mind was doing cartwheels. He was in agony, he'd just had the shit-scariest few minutes of his life, and now an attractive girl was, apparently, coming on to him.

She threaded an arm past his shoulder and grabbed the back of his neck. The other circled his waist, and with a power that belied her small frame, she pulled his body to hers. The hand at his neck pulled his head down slightly, past her face, until he could feel her breath on his ear.

'I have no name,' she whispered. '*We* have no name.'

The grip she had on him increased. He tried to pull away, to no avail.

'Our worlds have existed side by side for millennia,' she continued, the grip tightening, the pain increasing. He tried to talk, to shout, to do anything, but his throat was dry, the sounds died and all he could manage was a gurgle. 'We can cross over, but we need

your bodies, and there are *rules*… we can only take those who come to us willingly.'

Her grip shifted and she grabbed his shoulders, pushing him backwards so he was staring, uncomprehending, into her dead, black eyes.

'It's not about talent, or skill… it's about drive and determination. Never before have there been so many of you who fitted our… criteria,' she hissed, spittle foaming across her shiny scarlet lips.

Terry couldn't tear his gaze away from those eyes. They seemed to swell, filling his vision until he felt like he was staring into a vast, bottomless abyss. He could hear her voice as if coming from a thousand miles away, still telling him stuff that was probably very important, *vitally* important. But he didn't care.

'…need a body to inhabit,' said the voice. 'But before we can change, our old self must die, killed by another willing… volunteer.'

Was it important? It sounded like bollocks. His stomach lurched with vertigo as the edge of the abyss came nearer.

'…be proud, you fulfil two important tasks,' it continued.

Task! Terry's head cleared slightly. A word he knew and loved. He remembered now, it was all a game, a weird, scary wonderful game, with cameras, an audience, prizes and tasks!

She was smiling at him, but her mouth looked weird, almost too big for her face. A scarlet smear slicing her pale face in two. It split apart, revealing rows of white teeth like shards of glass.

'After our journey, we need sustenance,' the voice seemed to be coming from all around him. So many teeth. So sharp. So *close*.

'And *you*… are just what we're looking for.'

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A LITTLE DEAD MAN ON CLOCKCHANGES ROAD

by Wayne Mook

I was sat on a low brick wall waiting for a bus on Clockchanges Road as a smell came creeping from the bushes, a foul smell of rotting meat. Curiosity is my curse; I just had to look and wished I hadn't. A small bloke lay there in the bushes. He was about 50 with close-cropped grey hair, a black suit and a white shirt that was stained red with a great tear where his intestines hung out. He gave me an embarrassed smile as the flies flew around his head.

'Hello, err, what are you doing?' I said lamely.

What do you say in such a situation?

'Hello,' he sort of gurgled as he waved his hand. 'I'm waiting for someone to surprise them. It's a sort of revenge.'

'Oh. Well I hope you don't mind my saying but if you want to surprise someone I'd do something about the smell.'

'Really?'

'Yes, and I'd do something about the flies, too.'

'Thank you,' he gurgled as he got up in an odd bending way.

He began to shuffle away leaving a bit of his stomach on the floor.

'Excuse me. You've dropped a bit.'

He looked round, it was only then I realised what was so unnerving, as if seeing a dead bloke walking wasn't bad enough, it

was his stare. It felt like it came from far away and it was cold, I mean physically cold. It was as if I was staring into a deep grave and a freezing wind was blowing from it straight into my heart.

'I'm always dropping that,' he bubbled apologetically.

'You could tape it up when you're walking and put the tape in your pocket when you want to, erm, look, erm, scary.'

'I never thought of that. I'm a bit on the slow side these days. Well, thanks again and cheery bye.'

''Bye,' I replied and waved.

He waved back with the offal in his hand and staggered off. My bus came just as he disappeared.

'You look like you've seen a ghost, mate,' said the bus driver as I boarded the bus.

'Yes, I think I have in a manner of speaking.'

The bus driver gave me an odd look as he drove off. I sat down and wondered what his revenge would be. I never did find out. Damn, I knew I should have asked but you don't always think in these situations. At least I'll know what to ask next time.

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WHEN HELL FREEZES OVER

by Neil Christopher

It was gone ten o'clock in the evening when Fred Perkins decided to call it a night. There were five of us in the Butcher's Arms, Me, Fred, Percy Heath, Tom Campbell and Jack Weaver, who'd been landlord of the Arms since the 60's. We were all sat in the snug because the restaurant was closed for the winter and the public bar, with its juke box and video games just didn't seem to be the appropriate place for four old duffers to sit around in. Besides, what do I need space invaders for at my age?

The snug was the smallest room in the pub and it had an open fire so it was warmer than the public bar or the lounge. The smell of soot and ash, the deep brown stained oak tables and the waft of cigarette smoke all combined to create an atmosphere that seemed, I don't know, right. Along the back of the snug, a picture window looked out into the dark gravel car park and the row of birch and ash trees beyond. I sat and watched as the snow drifted and alighted on the stony surface before being whipped up by the wind and swirling through the outdoor security lights like locusts of water and ice, dancing in consort with the leafless branches of the birch trees in the north-easterly gale.

Hobbs Ford sat in a typically steep, narrow sided Lincolnshire Wolds valley. The village had been home for a short time to poet Alfred Supay who'd written of the village's squat Saxon church

with its overgrown churchyard and Spartan, purposeful-looking tower built of local, olive-green ironstone. He wrote of the ford, where the Grimwith Beck crosses Back Lane in a scene that looks almost too picturesque to be real. He also wrote of Hobb's Holt, a patch of woodland and scrub that sat at the head of the valley above the village on heavy clay soils from where the Grimwith Beck rose. In Supay's time the village was a thriving settlement, with a school, blacksmith, several ale houses, farms and a weekly market. Now it was home to barely 200 souls. The village was only a short detour from the main coast road and in the Summer was packed with tourists eager to see where one of Britain's finest poets lived and to look at the muse for some of his most famous work. On hot summer Sunday afternoons, it was often so busy that you could hardly move for parked cars and ice-cream vans. The holiday season on the coast is short, though, and by the end of September the village is quiet and isolated and alone. Besides, I don't think you ever really know a place until you know its secrets. By January it was hard to believe that there would ever be another outsider visiting again.

It was especially so during hard winters and this one was a prize-winner. I can remember as far back as 1963 when it was so cold all through February that the petrol froze in my Father's Standard 8 and we had to light a fire under the fuel tank to thaw it out. Tom Campbell could do even better, remembering the winter of '47, when the temperature stayed below freezing for six weeks between Christmas and mid February. The snow drifts were so deep at the head of the valley that the trees in Hobbs Holt next to the road were three-quarters covered by drifts and the Army had to deliver supplies, not just to Hobbs Ford, but also to surrounding villages like Friarby and Bluehill. When the wind blows from the east, Lincolnshire winters can be bleak and unforgiving. Someone once told me that travelling due east from the Wolds, the next area of high ground you came to were the Ural mountains, and standing in the teeth of a January easterly gale, you can well believe it. 1947, 1963, 1969, 1978 and 1981 – were years so frigid that they'd been burned into the local collective memory like a folk song that no-one admits to liking but which everyone knows the words to.

Between us in the Butchers Arms snug, we had 300 years of Lincolnshire winters, but we all agreed that this particular year was something else. Perhaps it was our ageing bones and the creeping advance of arthritis, but this winter was the first one I can remember being painful. The first snowfall had come at the end of October. I'd been visiting my Son and Daughter-in-Law in Manchester. I left their house as the sun was setting in limpid, cool, clear skies, and within an hour was driving across the Pennines in a blizzard. A trip that normally took three fours took five that night, and more than once I considered abandoning the car which refused to obey my orders on the slick, white road surface. The news called that Halloween 'Spooking in the snow' and used footage of children in Wellingtons dressed as ghosts and goblins kicking their way through snowdrifts as an antidote to whatever dreary and depressing event was the lead story. The following evening I sat in the Butchers Arms, just as we sat there that fateful January evening and I watched the frost creep along and across the glass in the window.

'It snowed like this in October '47.' Tom spoke quietly, bony fingers curled round his pint of mild and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. 'Just for a day or two, but after that it didn't warm up until April'. He turned his gaze from the crackling, hissing fire hearth to the unseasonal blanket of white on the other side of the window. 'It's going to be a rough one this year. Rougher than we've had for years.'

He wasn't wrong. November crept on with cold foggy days and ice-cold nights. In the ditches and hedge bottoms, the snow that had fallen in October remained throughout the whole month and the small turnout for the bonfire on the 5th on the sports field behind the village hall huddled as close to the flames as safety would permit. November went out with a bang as the fog was swept away by a violent northerly gale on the night of the 28th and 29th and in its wake came the first of what would become an endless series of bands of snow crawling in from the North Sea. By the 16th of December there were three foot drifts in the hollow on

Back Lane and the telephone box on church street need daily attention to allow access through the mountain of snow that had drifted into wind-sculpted shapes around it. Until this point, the ploughs and gritters had come through daily, keeping at least one of the back lanes to the main road open. The schools closed a week early for Christmas because so few pupils could get there. By the 20th the council were struggling to maintain open routes. Fred's boy works for the council and on the evening of the 20th he called into the Arms for a couple of pints with his Old Man, and he told us that the council had spent all its gritting money and was running out of salt for the roads and money to pay the necessary overtime. It wasn't just Lincolnshire either, he told us, it was also Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, East Yorkshire and Suffolk. Norfolk was particularly bad – it stuck out into the North Sea so it copped snow whether the wind was easterly, north-easterly or northerly. Places like Titchwell, Holme and Cley were effectively cut off because the snow drifted over the coast road right behind the ploughs and the showers were so frequent and so heavy that there were too few ploughs and men to hold back the tide.

Needless to say, it was a White Christmas, but Ladbrokes had closed the book in November and no-one felt much like listening to Bing Crosby. If he'd had to subsist on whatever the emergency services and the rapidly dwindling stock in the village shop could provide, he might not have been quite so keen to have all his Christmas's white.

By the end of the first week in January and perhaps as a result of the 48 hour blizzard on the night of the 1st and 2nd, the power started to go out. It was only ever temporarily and it would usually struggle back on after a few hours interruption, but it started to wake up a few people who had become complacent after mild winter after mild winter. The news had previously been about sledging kids, road tailbacks and sarcastic asides about global warming, but when the electricity starts to go off, it stops being a bookend to the sport and weather and edges towards the front of the bulletin. Old bastards like us watched the snow fall and spoke of the winter of

1980, then as it continued the winter of '63 and we were now at the stage where only Tom had a common frame of reference. He was too decent a man to say 'I told you so' as we sat in the snug in the Butchers watching yet another snow shower blow in on the easterly breeze, but we were all realistic enough to recognise it when we saw it. The cold kills people our age, and we were lucky enough to live in an insular little community whose isolation had bred a culture of neighbourly support. I didn't want to think about how many people were slowly freezing to death in their tiny retirement cottages on the Lincolnshire and Norfolk coast, their ideas of a retirement coloured by beautiful summer days spent on holiday and not troubled by the bleakness and the unforgiving east wind.

I've gone off the point, which I suppose is the privilege of old age, but please, if I do it again, feel free to ignore the ramblings of an old duffer. This particular evening was the 28th of January. We were sat in the snug as we had done countless previous nights listening to radio four in comfortable silence, only the low murmur of the radio, the crackling of the fire and the tick-tock of Jack's huge Grandfather clock intruding on the quiet. Jack sat on a bar stool on the punters side of the bar drinking a cup of coffee and reading the Racing Post. I was sat at the table nearest the window reading John Wyndham's The Kraken Wakes, glancing up occasionally to take a swig of Bateman's bitter and watch the white flakes twist and dance their way towards the ground. Tom and Percy wordlessly played dominoes on the table closest to the fire, Tom's arthritis plays up terribly in the winter, so he sits himself as close to the fire as he can. Fred sat where Fred always sat, in the high backed chair next to the ticking clock and stared out of the window into the pale winter darkness. We didn't speak much because there was no need, we'd said everything that was worth saying in the previous months and years. At our age, we have no patience for idle chit-chat.

As I said, it was about 10 when Fred drained the bottom of his pint glass, slowly stood up and took his hat and coat from the coat rack on the far wall.

'Reckon it's about time I was 'ome.'

'Aye. 'Night Fred.' Jack didn't look up from his paper.

'Night Fred.' Tom and Percy said together, attention never wavering from the tiles laid out in front of them.

'Mind how you go.' I said and he nodded slightly. Fred was well into his late seventies and wasn't as sure on his feet since he'd had his hip replaced.

'Night all.' He shuffled towards the door and I felt the brief stab of cold air as he walked into the swirling blackness. It was silent again for minutes until the door swung open and Fred walked back into the warmth.

'Forget summat?' Jack was still studying the form for the 3:30 at Bangor, but I looked up. Fred was as white as a sheet and shivering. He hadn't been out long enough to feel the cold that badly. I groaned as I got to my feet.

'What's the matter, Fred?' The others looked up into his haunted eyes and between us we shuffled him to Tom's chair next to the fire. Jack nipped behind the bar and poured out a brandy.

Fred looked between us with eyes wide and darting.

'There's something in the car park.'

'What?'

'I don't know. It looked at me. It was stood in the snow in the car park.

I walked to the window but could see little except for falling snow and frost crystals.

'There's nothing out there now.'

'There bloody well was!' Fred's voice was high and brittle and he was hunched into his chair like a child.

'All right Fred, calm down.' Jack had gone behind the bar and retrieved an enormous metal torch and his coat and boots. 'I'll have a look.' He handed Fred a brandy and the old man gulped it down.

Jack disappeared out of the door and we looked at Fred.

'What did he look like?' Tom sat next to Fred, who stared into the fire.

'I don't know, I thought it was a deer at first, or one of Bob Machin's sheep had got out. It looked at me.' He stared at us with haunted eyes. Even by the fire the colour hadn't returned to his

face. 'It looked at me, like it could see into my soul.' He rubbed is arm as I digested this last sentence. 'My arm hurts.'

Jack stuck his head round the door and it was covered in tiny white flakes.

'Bob' he said, looking at me. 'Get your coat on and come and look at this.'

Tom and Percy looked from Fred to me, but didn't offer to come into the cold. Hearing Fred talk and looking through the window at the cold night didn't get me moving any quicker. I set my book down and got my coat and stepped into the winter.

It was cold and the swirling snow stung the eyes almost as badly as the freezing wind. The pub had shielded us from the wail of the wind but outside it moaned and rattled the trees and shaped the snow into constantly changing sculptures. I looked around at the houses across the road, lights nestled against the darkness of the trees and hills behind and wished I was inside. I walked over to where Jack was stood. His torch pointed at the ground. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the swaying, rustling trees and the wind seemed to steal his voice away.

'You see that?'

I looked down and saw a row of neat, almost dainty footprints in the snow. They lead away, out of the car park towards the road and Mr and Mrs Camberley's place on Back Lane. They seemed to start in the car park.

'Yeah.' I shouted. 'I see 'em.' I looked closely. They looked like deer tracks but there was something odd about them. I'm no hunter, but I've lived in the countryside long enough to recognise deer. These were that same two-toed shape but the gait was all wrong. Then it came to me and I rushed for the door as I remembered what Fred had said.

As I crashed through the door, I noticed that Tom and Percy had moved Fred from the fireplace to one of the long wall seats on the other side of the snug. Their faces were etched with concern. I looked at Fred and sat next to him. He looked so old.

'What did you see, Fred. It looked like a deer or a sheep, but there was something different about it, wasn't there?' Fred just

nodded. Tom steered me to one side.

'His left arm hurts and he's struggling for air.' He was speaking in low, hushed tones. 'I think it's a heart attack.'

'Call for an ambulance.' We both knew how long it would take an ambulance to battle its way from Horncastle or Louth. Nevertheless Tom leaned over the bar and lifted the telephone from it's cradle. I went back outside. Jack was stood in the same spot.

'There's something odd about these tracks.' I looked at him.

'You noticed the odd gait too?' Jack looked at me like I was a lunatic.

'I was brought up in Leeds, do I look like Ray Mears to you?' I had to admit, he didn't. 'No, we've been stood here for five minutes and it's been snowing like a bastard the whole time, and these tracks are still clear as a bell.' We both took a step back. 'You're the animal expert – what are they?'

I looked at him, lips white and eyebrows crusted with white flakes.

'If I didn't know better, I'd say they were sheep or goat.'

'Could be one of Machin's sheep escaped?'

'I don't think so.'

'Why not?'

I turned to go back inside.

'Machin's sheep don't walk on two legs.'

***

We made Fred as comfortable as possible. The ambulance was coming from Louth, but it would take them hours to get here if they could get here at all. Fred wasn't in tremendous pain which was a good sign, but he looked ancient by the orange glow of the fire. Jack and I stood by the bar as Tom and Percy talked quietly to the frightened old man.

'I need to know what it is.' Jack whispered.

'I don't.' I had no idea what it was that had stood staring at Fred in the snow, but I didn't feel much like knowing. Fred was my friend, though. I'd known him for almost fifty years and had stood

by him through thick and thin. He helped me out when I lost my job in the 1970's, and I'd stood with him when he'd strayed from the married path with that girl from Bluehill in the 1960's. It had been a scandal at the time, she was 10 years younger than him and they'd been seen arguing up by the Holt as she tried to get him to leave Anna, his wife. I looked at Fred as I tried to remember her name. It was Alice or Alex or something like that. He hadn't left Anna and Alex, if that was her name, had left for Nottingham or London soon after, never to be seen again. In time Anna had forgiven him, but others in the village had not. He was my friend, and whilst I hadn't any desire to see whatever had been stood outside the pub, I wanted to help Fred, and I had no desire to see Jack go alone.

'Fine. Get me a torch.'

We left Tom and Percy in the snug with the fire built up, in case the ambulance did manage to make it through the snow. We wrapped ourselves up in every coat, scarf and hat we could find and, torches in hand, set off to follow the tracks still pristine and unmarked in the snow.

The trailed out of the car park and headed in a straight line over Back Lane and into Mr and Mrs Camberley's front garden. The Camberley place is a summer bungalow, they're a nice couple, but they only use the place at summer weekends and now it was as dark and lifeless as the surrounding countryside. We followed the tracks across the lawn and onto the path around the house where they stopped against the wall.

'What the hell…' Jack shone his torch onto the snow to our left and right, but the tracks stopped. 'Where did it go? It's like it walked through the wall.'

We walked round the back of the house and the tracks appeared from the other side of the house. I shivered, though it had nothing to do with the cold. We stared at them for a while, but could make no sense of it. I nudged Jack and wordlessly we followed the tracks onward.

We fought our way through the Leylandii hedge at the back of the Camberley's and traced the tracks across a paddock. It was

owned by a local farmer, Isaac Machin and was the home to the sheep who had briefly been a suspect in this most perplexing case. The sheep themselves were gathered, crushed together and silent in the corner of the field furthest from the tracks. They eyed us suspiciously as we walked past but they stood completely still and didn't utter a sound. It was unnerving. The tracks crossed the field and as we got to the middle, the shelter offered by the trees and buildings in the village was gone and I felt the cold wind flow effortlessly through my clothes and lap round my bones. The snow swept across the field like a dust cloud in the desert and we sank into lying snow up to our shins, making the slog even more difficult and uncomfortable. Eventually the tracks approached the low sheep shed that Machin had erected on the far side of the field. Like before, the walker hadn't wavered or altered course, but this time the shed was low enough for us to see that it had simply jumped onto the roof of the shed and continued. Jack stopped and shone his torch at the door. It had been kicked in from the inside and the wood was splintered and broken.

'Those sheep wanted to be out of here in a hurry.'

We eased ourselves over the fence and onto Church Lane. A single streetlamp illuminated the white landscape with a sodium orange light and I turned to look back at the way we had come. Jack did the same and we stared at the perfectly straight line our rapidly filling footprints had made.

Neither of us said anything. I can't speak for Jack, but I suspected that I knew what, or who it was that we were following and I didn't want to speak its name.

The tracks continued across the road as far as the wall surrounding the churchyard where they took a totally unexpected detour around the edge of the wall and traced the route round. That the tracks had deviated from their machine-like course should have been a relief, but it wasn't. We slapped our hands together and pulled our clothes tighter round ourselves and continued to follow the footprints when the church clock chimed the half-hour and Jack and I both leapt out of our skins.

We crossed the Grimwith Beck gingerly and traced the tracks

up the hill where previously that day kids with sledges had turned it into a pretty impressive toboggan run. At the top of the hill, silhouetted against the grey snowflake-speckled sky sat Hobbs Holt.

I'm sure every village has a place like Hobbs Holt. It's a place with a reputation. Perhaps it was the thick blackthorn scrub that surrounds it, or the springs and sands under the trees themselves, perhaps it represented a piece of wild, untamed primordial woodland in an otherwise pliant landscape that gave it its ambience. Either way, Hobbs Holt was a dark place. Stories in the village abounded about it. They had burned a woman who chose to live up there as a Witch in the 17th Century. Dogs from the local hunt went missing and never came out, it was a Pagan place of sacrifice. In these enlightened days it was easy to dismiss stories like these as local colour, tall stories to amuse the tourists, but it's a lot more difficult to dismiss when it's dark, the east wind is tearing down the valley and the dark ash trees and alders loom out of the black against the racing skies like Leviathan himself.

We slogged up the hill towards the Holt through drifts that were deepening with every step. The head of the valley was more exposed and open to the wind than the village in the valley bottom so our progress got slower and our body heat ebbed away. We mounted the crest of the hill and the Holt unfolded before us, 30 yards away.

We saw it, and we stopped.

It was stood under the trees and we shouldn't have been able to make out its form through the darkness and the twisting columns of snow, but I saw every detail clearly like it was a calm summer's day. It was in a gap in the blackthorns and it stood, staring at our huddled, motionless bodies with hircine eyes, its forked tongue flicking and lapping over its lipless mouth and its cloven feet standing proud of the snow.

It raised a naked, fur covered arm and pointed in turn at us and I felt myself recoiling. Jack broke and ran, screaming words I couldn't understand, but I couldn't move. The Beast lowered its arm and pointed at the ground beneath its feet, then it hopped into the field and walked past me, its sulphur yellow eyes never leaving

mine, before it reached the crest of the hill and was lost from sight. I staggered forward to the place where it had stood and turned my torch to where it had pointed. The ground was clear of snow and none was piled around it. Excavated by unknown hand, were the filthy, earth-stained bones of a human being. I recoiled from the sight, the image of this pathetic grave combined with the cold and the tumultuous noise of the trees swaying and creaking in the gale as well as the apparition that had brought us here was too much, and I bolted for the safety of the public house.

***

I followed the unearthly footprints of the apparition back towards the Butchers Arms and as before, they stopped at the wall of the Pub. I crashed through the door and Tom and Percy, faces drawn and pale helped me through the door and sat me in front of the fire. I shook hard and my eyes and nose watered as the heat slowly began to return to my extremities.

'Jesus Christ, Bob, where have you been – we've been worried sick.'

I couldn't tell them because my teeth were chattering so hard, but had I not been mute with cold, I would not have spoken of what I'd seen.

They sat with me for a short time and I noticed that Fred was

lying on the sofa. I looked at the two men, but they averted their eyes.

'He died, Bob. I'm sorry.' Tom placed a hand on my shoulder.

'When?' I stammered.

'Ten minutes ago. He kept saying 'I'm Sorry, I'm Sorry'. He wrote this.' Tom handed me a piece of paper and I forced my hands to hold it still enough to read. It was written in spidery text and obviously took great effort to write. It read…

Alex is still in Hobbs Holt. I am sorry.

'What does it mean?'

I thought back to Fred's affair and the pathetic unmarked grave that the Beast had shown me and I knew – I knew what Fred knew, that his secret could not endure in death as it had in life, and I knew why we had been visited by this thing that should not be here.

'I don't know.' I lied and set the paper down.

Villages like Hobbs Ford have secrets, kept by individuals and families and generations for decades and centuries. These were hard, tough places with hard, tough people. Secrets corrupt and the implications of keeping them loom over places like this just as Hobbs Holt loomed over the village, a physical manifestation what waits for us on the other side when we err on this side. Fred knew what had come for him that night and why.

We all have secrets and those secrets come with a price. I know the cost I'll pay for mine, but I'll share it when Hell freezes over.

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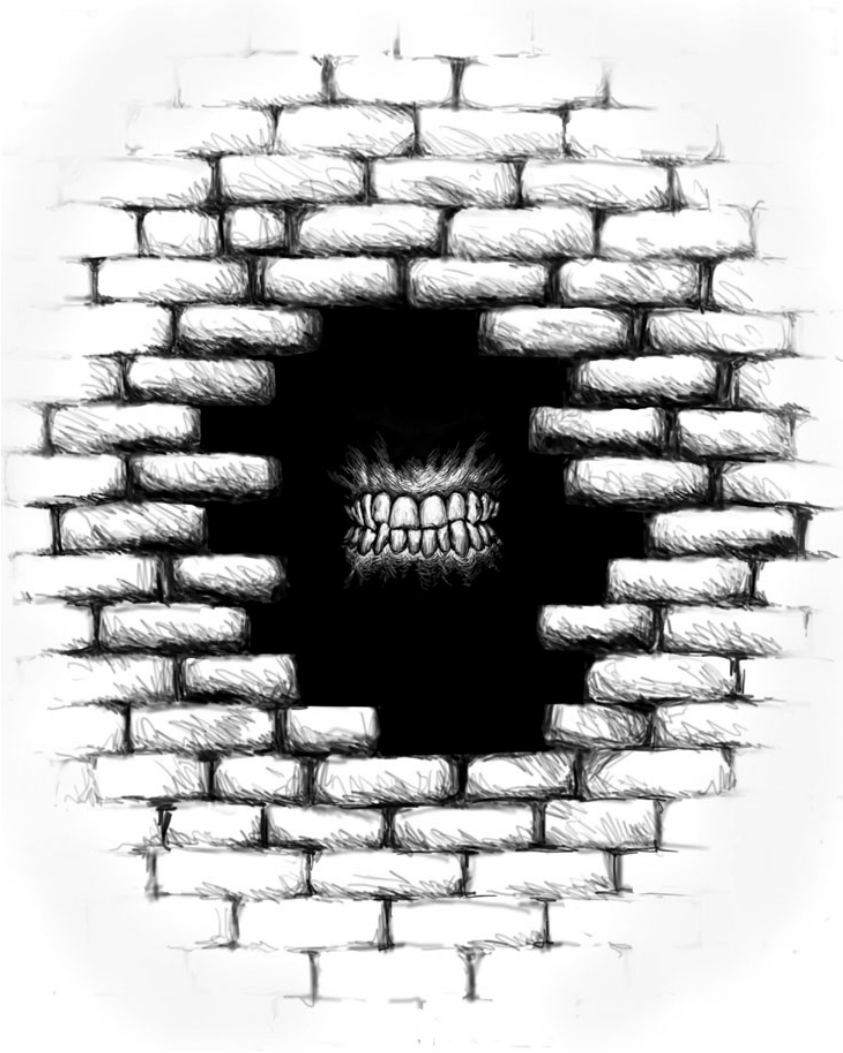

THE PASSAGE

By Mark Ferguson

The red glow of the alarm showed 3:02am as Peter drifted in that peculiar mental realm between sleep and wakefulness.

'Get up!'

At first he thought he had dreamt it, that way when you're half asleep that an ordinary and innocent noise is oddly transformed into something entirely more sinister and loaded with meaning.

'Get up!'

Peter sat bolt upright in bed. He was now fully awake; the sound of the voice, a man's voice, harsh and menacing stripped all sleepiness from his mind. His heart thudded painfully against his ribcage as he tried to argue away the raw fact of the voice.

Perhaps he had not heard it, he had been sleeping and it was his first night in a new house. He had just about convinced his mind that this was the case, his heart beat slowing, when he heard it a third time.

'Listen man, if we don't move now we're for it!'

This last one was unmistakeable, it was loud enough to make Mary, (who had infamously slept through the worst thunderstorm of the past quarter century), stir in her sleep. Peter was concerned; he could not quite tell where the voice was coming from. Burglars must have broken in. Hill House was, after all, an excellent target

for criminal entrepreneurs. He reached under the bed, his fingers walked towards the length of wood he always kept there. They found nothing.

'Shit' he hissed out loud. He knew exactly where it was; it lay at the bottom of a box with Pete: Bedroom written on it in black marker. He swung his legs off the bed and crept towards the door. He moved slowly as he had not had time to learn which boards creaked and he did not want to alert any intruders. The door swung open on greased hinges to the upper landing. He could see enough of the layout by moonlight through an upper window to make his way to the top of the stairs. One by one he inched his way down the carpeted stairs to the entrance hallway, his pulse a maddening distraction in his ears as he strained to hear anything. The bottom hall was a washed out landscape of greys and deeper, darker shadows. There were many places where someone might be lurking. All at once the adrenaline rush that had forced him past his fear and propelled him downstairs drained away, leaving only an empty sick feeling behind. He was rooted to the floor. Fear paralysed him. Long, painful minutes passed before something happened that spurred him to explore further.

***

'Sort a light out mate, I can't see a bloody thing!'

It was the voice again. It still seemed to be coming from downstairs. That was impossible! The cellar was one of the most secure rooms in the house. The door to the cellar was adjacent to the kitchen at the far end of the hallway. He made his way along the whole length of the corridor, one tense breath held in his chest the whole way.

In the gloom he fumbled for the handle of the cellar door and found the lock instead, still secure.

How did they manage to lock it from inside, was someone still in the main part of the house? Was Mary in danger?

Mary? He hadn't even thought about Mary properly.

He decided after only a very few seconds to press on with his

investigation of the cellar. He would only go down far enough to prove to himself that someone was in the house, then sneak back upstairs to lock and jam the bedroom door before calling the police.

He quickly fetched the key for the lock from its resting place behind the plant pot which housed his cactus, a fellow resident of many houses now.

The key turned silently in the big Yale lock which he then lifted off and placed onto a towel in the kitchen. Returning to the cellar he swung the door open and was struck by how truly, impenetrably black the darkness was. He could not use any light down there; whoever was down there would see even a match clearly against the blackness.

For the second time that evening he froze to the spot.

If he went down in the dark not only would he see nothing but he would be more vulnerable with his eyes less adjusted than anything that might be down there.

'Why anything?' a more primitive part of his mind whispered.

However if he lit a match or took a torch he would broadcast his presence.

'To hell with it' he whispered.

Sneaking back into the kitchen, he took a box of matches from the windowsill.

***

He made his way down steep, stone steps.

The match cast shadows that flickered against the stone walls and a myriad of shifting patterns surrounded him. His already strained nerves saw shapes in the dancing shadows that frightened him the way he had been frightened as a child when the crooked fingers of evil, old trees had tapped and scratched urgently at his bedroom window.

He stopped near the bottom of the stairs and seriously considered going back up to Mary and taking things from there. However something compelled him to continue.

There was something about that voice, something was eluding him. It was at the back of his mind, eating away. He stepped the last few feet onto the tiled floor of the cellar. It was cold down here which made the skin on his arm raise up in little bumps. Something else in the cellar was making the hair on the nape of his neck crawl.

He lit a fresh match and held it high.

It was as he suspected, he could see nobody, yet he somehow knew that he was not alone down here. On his right was an old fashioned light switch. He flicked it to the down position and three dusty bulbs spilled light into the cellar.

At the same moment there was a sound like a gust of wind and, he could have sworn, a guttural moan.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a flitting shadow sweep towards the far wall of the cellar. He spun, his heart crashing again, but saw nothing. He dropped the match before it burned him and walked to the far wall. On a whim he put his hands on it and felt along the brickwork. One section of the wall felt a little looser, as if the mortar had not set properly. In fact he could feel the tiniest hint of a breeze tickling his fingertips. That did not make sense. Although he was still relatively new to the house, he knew the cellar was situated within the confines of the four outside walls. There could be no breeze from outside down here.

***

He pushed a little more forcefully and to his great surprise, and with a crash that startled him, three bricks fell outwards and down to the opposite side of the wall.

The sound of the bricks hitting the floor was delayed. There must be a drop on the other side. He poked at some more bricks and a few gave way but the majority were held firm by mortar of a better quality. His efforts had made a hole a little larger than a man's head. The light from the three bulbs cast no illumination beyond the wall, even if he stood up on tiptoe and craned his neck, he could see nothing.

He put his ear to the hole and listened, though he could not

have explained what he expected to hear.

***

'Peter, what the hell are you doing?'

'Ahh' he jumped, striking the top of his head solidly on an unyielding brick.

'You gave me such a scare you silly sod…why are you down here in the middle of the night?' Peter lied. He had never lied to his wife before, but this night seemed to be full of surprises.

'I just fancied exploring a bit, restless legs sort of thing….' He mumbled, doing his best to sound sheepish and apologetic.

'Come up to bed, eh love?'

He did so, but not before making sure that the cellar door was tightly locked.

***

Eventually he slept only to dream of a passage.

He walked along winding corridors lit only by the inconsistent glow of lanterns fixed at regular intervals. The walls were moist and lichen spotted. The air he breathed tasted and smelt foul; a dry, musty smell that carried a hint of rot.

In his dream he knew that something important lay just around the corner. Something was waiting for him, but no matter how fast he walked, even when he ran, he could not reach the end of the passage.

***

Morning came, and it did so with a bright and healthy sunshine that served to dispel Peter's fears from the previous night. Mary made them a full breakfast of scrambled eggs, toasted brioche with butter and a pot of steaming tea. The range-style cooker took a bit of figuring out but the food tasted lovely.

'You have remembered that I am away this weekend?' Mary

prompted as she passed him the teapot. 'Oh yeah, the conference, I guess with all the chaos of moving that had slipped my mind.' An idea had occurred to Peter.

'I'll sort myself out don't worry about that.' He washed up as Mary dressed and packed. The everydayness of breakfast and housework made the oddness of last night seem unreal. Daylight made a fool of night-time fears. Yet the impression left by that voice and the hole in the wall did not completely dissipate.

Half an hour later, the kitchen was clean and Mary had kissed him goodbye till Sunday evening. He was on his own.

***

Less than two minutes after that he was back down in the cellar with the lights on to better examine the hole he had made last night.

The strange presence he had been aware of was absent, but the hole was real enough. He got hold of one likely looking brick and heaved, bracing his feet against the base of the wall for support. It shifted slowly, which encouraged him to pull a little harder.

His hand slipped off the edge of the brick and the fingernail of his right index finger tore off to the quick, spattering blood over the brick and floor in thick scarlet drops.

'Fuck!' He spat the word out through teeth clenched against the pain.

With his uninjured hand he reached for the hanky in his left pocket and wrapped it round the finger. Within seconds the white cotton was red. He stomped upstairs to the kitchen and bandaged up his finger as best he could, splicing it to the adjacent digit for support. As he sat at the kitchen table the rhythmic throb of his finger seemed an omen. Perhaps he should leave well enough alone. The space beyond the wall was probably just the foundations to the house, some extra space that was ill-used by the architects who designed it.

Even as he thought this, he knew he could not let it be.

The fact of the hole and the dream he had about it bothered him

like an unreachable itch.

After two fruitless hours of trying not to think about it, he resolved that knowledge might sort his curiosity. He packed a light lunch and headed for the library. Outside, Northwich was in full Saturday swing. Canal boats puttered smokily up the Weaver, piloted by retirees who in turn puffed smoke of their own from pipes clenched between smiling teeth. Elsewhere groups of identically dressed teens wasted time as only they could. Peter liked the town, with his money they could have lived pretty much anywhere. They had both agreed to live in town. Peter felt they had a future here.

The library was housed in a Tudor style building. It was well maintained and only fifteen minutes walk from Hill House.

Once inside he decided to ask for guidance rather than search for what he wanted alone. A sign hung beside the rear fire exit read, 'Historical and Rare documents'

Beneath the sign was a neat, little desk, behind which sat a neat, little man. He proved to be most helpful and within another fifteen minutes Peter had a copy of a 17th century map of original salt mine shafts and corridors for the area of Northwich below Hill House.

So it was that before an hour had passed from leaving home he found what he had been looking for. According to the map there had been a particularly old stretch of tunnel underneath his new home. He noticed that on the map there was a red cross on one end of the passage and another halfway through. The key at the bottom of the map indicated that a red cross meant a collapse of that particular tunnel.

This information fascinated Peter. He photocopied the map, blowing it up so that it focussed on the portion under his cellar. Then he left for the Penny Black and a well deserved pint.

***

The Penny Black was a good place to get information about all sorts of local things. Some of the regular drinkers were a mine of information, he thought with a wry smile.

Over the course of his pint and an unanticipated second he found out from a man called Joe, (whose family had mined for generations), that there had been a cave in. A man called Fullman, whose first name was lost to time, had died down there along with two others. Despite the pint Peter's mouth went dry.

'Thanks for the info, here get yourself another' he said, sliding a tenner across the table. A hand darted out and back improbably swiftly. 'Thanks mate, listen, it's none of my business really but what's your interest in this passage?'

'Just curious, doing a bit of local research.'

'If you don't mind me saying, leave it alone. In mining families, we always called it Fullman's passage. It had a bad name. My granddad always crossed himself when he heard it mentioned. There's something not right down there.' The old man's eyes were wide. He was genuinely frightened by whatever that something might be.

'Don't worry, I'm not going digging!' Peter managed a weak smile, but the man's warning had unnerved him.

***

Peter paid little attention to the sights and sounds of the town on the walk back. He was too busy weighing up the implications of the morning's discovery. There had been a cave-in and three men had died. Right beneath the house he and Mary had just moved into. As his feet found their way home on auto pilot, he gradually convinced himself that what he had experienced the previous night had been a genuine paranormal occurrence.

He believed in paranormal activity. He thought that in this instance the men might be trying to communicate with the living or simply stuck in this world unable to escape to the next due to their sudden violent deaths.

Mary, by far the more religious, would have nothing to do with his interest in these things. Where he would use the word paranormal, she would prefer the term 'occult'.

***

Back at the house he made his way first to the garage, leaving his papers from town on the kitchen table. It was a wasteland in miniature; box upon box stretched out across the floor filled with all manner of things. Wicked-toothed saws and blades adorned the walls. The many boxes were filled with random house junk. The sort of items that are not quite useful enough to be kept within easy reach, but not so useless that they could be thrown away. He had to pick his way across a treacherous floor of this detritus before he reached the tool rack on the far side.

Many were old and worn, but after a few minutes searching he had picked out a serviceable pick axe, a length of stout rope and even a cave diver style head lamp. This was much more modern than the other equipment. Trying the torch out on a vaguely optimistic whim, he was delighted to find that it contained fresh batteries.

It occurred to him that perhaps he was not the first resident to notice something unusual about the cellar. After a sweaty five minutes and one scraped shin, the tools he needed were stacked neatly in one corner of the cellar. Leaving things for the time being he made himself a cheeseburger for lunch. He had taken one bite when the phone rang, its high pitched tone making him jump in the quiet of the house.

'Peter, its Mary …how are you doing?'

'Fine thanks, just eating some lunch. I went into town today and had a pint at the Penny Black'

'Uh .....I'm not sure how to say this without sounding odd love, but will you promise me something?'

'Sure what? What's up?'

'Just promise me that you won't mess around with the cellar. I …I had a nightmare about it last night.' Mary sounded upset. A chill gripped his spine as he remembered his own bad dreams.

'I saw you trapped down in the cellar, but it wasn't our cellar it was deeper and darker and… Peter, you weren't alone down there. The dream really freaked me out. I feel stupid for calling but

it would give me peace to know that you kept out of there. I just feel that it's bad somehow.'

'Eh you daft bat, what're you worrying about? OK if it makes you feel better I will keep the door to the cellar locked all weekend'

It troubled Peter how easy lying became once you started to make a habit of it.

'Thanks Pete, I'll see you Sunday night, love you.'

'Love you too.'

She hung up.

***

Once when he had been a student at university Peter had read about the Arabic notion of the Zahir. This was a form of all encompassing obsession. Once it gripped a man it would not let go, would not dissipate until fulfilment or death. Whichever came first. Despite priding himself on his rationalism, he now believed he was experiencing an obsession of this magnitude. No sooner had he promised his wife to avoid the place, he found himself walking down towards the tools he had left there earlier. The door of the cellar seemed welcoming. As he descended he gradually became aware of the presence from last night, only much, much fainter. Once standing on the cobbles he put his hand around the handle of the pickaxe. At once the sense of a presence swelled, grew and filled the cellar for one terrifying and exhilarating moment. Peter's breath caught raggedly in his throat and he broke sweat despite the coolness of the cellar air. He felt, rather than heard a half whispered exhortation.

'Do it...'

***

The first swing did not go as expected. The tip of the pickaxe bounced off a brick and his swing gouged a chunk out of the floor, three inches to the left of his foot.

'Bollocks 'he muttered, tightening his grip, wincing at the pain in his right hand.

The second swing was much better; it knocked another four bricks back and down into the deeper passage beyond the wall. The voice came again.

'Good…' this time with the faintest suggestion of a whisper.

As he swung the axe over and over he was aware of a constant encouraging presence. Something was pleased with his actions and was actually urging him to greater effort and speed. The job should have been exhausting but he swung away like a labourer with years of work-hardened muscle, smashing all obstacles away. He worked like a machine, and was soon only aware of the swing and crash of the pick and the whispering.

***

Time passed, he had no recollection of how long.

Slowly he came to himself again and noticed the aching pain in his shoulders and the complete absence of daylight from the cellar stairs. Looking at his watch he was shocked to see the hands displaying 9:34pm. Where had the hours gone?

He was even more shocked by the gaping hole torn in the wall. How had he done that? It measured at least 6 feet wide and 7 feet high. You could literally drive a car through it; in fact it looked as if someone already had.

He was still holding the pick, but it felt oddly light. Looking down at it he saw that he was only holding onto a broken handle. The head of the pick lay on the floor, a trick of the light making it appear twisted. He bent over, (wincing as his muscles shrieked) there was no trick of the light, the pick axe head was twisted as if it had been squeezed and turned by inhumanly strong hands.

Peter looked at his own hands. They were a mess. A multitude of cuts and bruises made it look as if he had been uprooting thorn bushes with no protective gloves.

He was suddenly outrageously thirsty and hungry. It was almost a physical pain. Looking again at the scene of man-made

destruction he could not begin to imagine how much energy he had burned since he came down, (had that been 2pm?). He stumbled upstairs on leaden legs.

On the table were his unfinished cheeseburger and the plans from town. He devoured the burger, eating with scant regard for manners. Then to the fridge where he urgently gulped down a pint of milk. He still felt hungry, so he lifted out a packet of jaffa cakes and some Irn Bru. He sat and methodically ate every biscuit washing it down with three cans.

Better…much better.

With his body refreshed, his mind was free to drift back to thoughts of the passage. Part of him wanted nothing more than to fall asleep, but as before he felt driven by forces he could not explain or articulate.

'Just a quick look inside' he told himself, entirely aware of the self deception.

So he heaved himself out of the wooden chair and made what would be his final trip to the cellar. The entrance to the passage was perfectly black. The walls around were gently lit by the bulbs, but no beam penetrated the darkness in the middle. He strapped the head lamp on and turned the casing to allow the piercing halogen beam to do its job. Next he took the rope and set about finding a good anchor point to secure it. He found the perfect spot in a massive ale keg set on solid oak feet at the rear of the cellar. He heaved at one corner to judge the weight and guessed it at about two hundred kilograms.

There was no way he could shift that by climbing down, as he only weighed eighty five, (unless something pulls me down on the other side he smiled to himself, instantly regretting the thought.)

He secured the rope as tightly as his painful hand and fingers would allow and returned to the mouth of the passage. It sort of felt right to call it that.

'Well time to be swallowed up 'he announced to the thin air and giggled; the sound empty in the cold cellar.

He had only ever abseiled once, and swung tentatively over the edge to lean backwards. So far so good, he took a first few steps

and was pleased to see that the rope took his weight with ease. Also, he was able to share the load between his shoulders and his legs this way. The beam highlighted the bricks on the other side. They were dirty and spider-ridden. A few feet down he saw the foundations stones under the cellar. As he continued to hop and step further in he saw tightly packed sand and soil and then thicker earth run through with boulders. He paused to catch his breath and look up. The cellar floor was some twenty feet above him already.

Now unsure of the wisdom in going lower, he looked down, the headlamp punching a narrow blade of light through the gloom. Far below, perhaps twenty feet again, was an earth floor riddled with bricks and debris, no doubt from his pickaxe.

As he stared down he became dizzy and swung left, slipped and jarred his side against the wall. Twenty feet above the rope twisted violently back and forth over a jagged tooth of mortar. It began to fray. Below, Peter struggled to right himself, only to slip in the other direction as his foot found no grip in the darkness.

The rope snapped. He heard it go, like a gunshot. The sound was still ringing off the walls as he hit the earthen floor. One dislodged brick broke the floating rib on his left side; another smashed his right ankle like an egg under a hammer. Several more crunched into his right arm and shoulder. Much to his dismay he did not black out. He experienced all of the immediate and unprecedented agony his injuries could deliver. His scream drowned out the diminishing echo of the rope gunshot and filled the whole passage.

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With nothing else to do, he lay perfectly still until, with excruciating slowness, the pain receded and he decided that only his ankle and rib were broken. The right arm and shoulder were most likely only bruised to the bone.

With a grunt he rolled onto his back. The bones in his ankle crunching together like smashed glass. He was desperate to breath deeper and faster, but even a moderate lungful of air stabbed his

side through with hot knives.

He levered himself to a kneeling position and looked around him. Thank god the flashlight had not broken. To his left was a motley collection of tools, all modern.

'That bastard has been down here before me.'

The previous owner must have covered his own excavations with the fresh mortar.

He stretched his hand towards a length of wood and dragged it back towards him.

With this make-shift walking stick he was able to struggle upright.

Though there was no way his damaged foot would take even the slightest weight.

Looking up again he saw that the light was some forty feet above him, he felt properly afraid for the first time. Before, when he had been aware of the presence up there, that was fine. It was almost like he was being honoured in some way by witnessing a genuine paranormal occurrence. Down here, he thought, if that same presence made itself known he would probably shit himself.

'Mary...' he whispered, 'I'm sorry…'

All the events of his first weekend in Hill House had led to this moment.

He saw now that he had to press forward. At the very least it would be another whole day before his wife returned; he could still see what lay at the end of the tunnel.

When he had studied the map in the library he had correctly guessed that one end of the cave-in was already covered by the foundations of the house. The other was about two hundred feet along this passage. So he began to walk, swinging awkwardly on his crutch on every other step. The beam lit portions of the walls and ceilings erratically. Things looked much as he had expected them to. Heavy metal lanterns, centuries cold, swung from thick low-set beams. Buckets lay overturned in dust. The air itself was thick and settled heavy on everything. Breathing it was unpleasant, as it clogged his throat and nostrils. All along the length of the passage were discarded tools and occasionally, the odd item of cloth-

ing. Around one particularly tight corner he found a wide brimmed hat with a ragged hole in the top. It looked as if a rock or beam had struck someone on the head, perhaps as a result of the cave in? Judging by the size of the hole it would have resulted in a horrible injury. Another fifty feet along and he began to notice a change in the atmosphere. It thickened and the air grew denser. The sense of something else being there with him grew more palpable with every step. This place felt like a tomb. He wondered how the men had died. Had they been killed instantly or had some of them starved to death in the dark, left to their fate by workmates who had gone home to eat, drink and screw their wives in the world of light and life above ground?

The passage floor changed from hard packed earth to loose shale as it opened out into a surprisingly wide chamber. The walls were encrusted with lichen and other, stranger growths. He limped to the middle of the chamber and looked up and around. Given the circumstances it was quite beautiful really. The walls swept up to a high and smooth ceiling. He thought it was a little like a subterranean chapel.

For a few moments he knew peace and calm again.

'Move it, MOVE IT! Sharpish boys… the whole damn thing's going to fall!'

'Shit' Peter spun at the sound of the shout. It was from right behind him, his bad ankle gave at the sudden movement and he landed hard on his arse. The breath left his lungs with a gasp and the jarring impact winded him at the same time as sending renewed fiery darts of pain through his injured limbs.

' RUN!' The voice was almost a roar now and this time Peter saw something as well.

At the source of the sound there was a shadow that the beam of his flashlight would not disperse. The shadow was in the shape of a human being. As he stared at it unbreathing, frozen in shock, it twisted in on itself and was gone.

There was silence again, a silence that slowly gave way to a creaking noise from above. He looked up again and saw dust and tiny chunks of rock falling from the midpoint of the ceiling, the

shadow was there too. The shape gave the impression of a man heaving at some half buried object. The creak became a groan and the trickle of rock a torrent. He knew what was happening. Unable to drag himself to his feet he crawled towards the far side of the chamber. Without his injuries, he might have made it.

A few feet from the relative safety of a sturdy outcrop of rock, several tons of rock and soil thundered down upon the chamber. In an instant he was buried under the outer edge of the rock fall. His legs and waist crushed under a huge weight, his face and chest forced into the dust, Peter twisted his head. He spat to clear his mouth, gagging at the taste. As he was only a few feet from the rocky shelf he could see that there was already something under it. It took his eyes a few moments to register everything he saw. The outcrop was at the entrance to another passage. This passage extended for only about ten feet before ending in another rock fall. He must be at the end of the tunnel. He had found it.

***

Underneath the shelf of rock were three bodies. No..…bodies was not the right word, these things were like mummies he had seen in a museum as a child. They looked like men from whom every last molecule of moisture had been sucked.

Two lay on the ground. One with a fist sized hole in the cranium, and an assortment of worn garments still clinging to the skeletal form in a mockery of life. Next to the dry corpse lay a shattered pickaxe handle. Peter thought of the discarded hat back along the passage. He coughed, unaware in the dark of the scarlet stream that traced a path down his chin. He was aware of a very wrong feeling in his chest. Something had shifted down there, he was broken inside. He knew this because he could not feel his legs; in fact nothing below the waist had any feeling in it at all.

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Alongside the wall another dead man was propped. This skele-

ton was that of a far larger man, and there was evidence of horrific injury. Most of the major bones that he could see through the patchy vest were twisted and shattered. In several places along the ribs were gaping holes. Peter told himself that these were injuries caused by the cave in, but he couldn't believe that anymore. How could he when he had such a clear view of the third corpse? This one was sat bolt upright on a bench-like section of rock. The clothes were well preserved and the body itself looked far less dry than the others. It still looked moist. Dark, sagging flesh still clung to the bones and there was a distinct presence surrounding the corpse, the same one from last night and from the cellar.

One dead hand still gripped a vicious knife, now rusty. The other grasped a chunk of bone. At the corpse's feet lay a bowl with more bones inside. He pieced the sights together like a child constructing a jigsaw picture of a night terror. He did not want to accept what the evidence of his eyes suggested. He did not want to see.

The headlamp flickered once. Then again. In the unsteady beam he saw the shadow again. This time it rose from within the corpse and glided towards him.

'Too late…we're caught in it lads!' spoke a familiar voice. He saw the dim beginnings of a face within the shadow. It grew closer still. Peter thrashed frantically, but the horrible weight of the rock did not allow him any free movement.

It smiled.

Fuck! Were those teeth…how could a shadow have teeth?

'Oh God' he whispered.

A face from out of a nightmare bent over him.

'We're trapped down here boys and Fullman's not gonna starve'.

The face was inches from his own, the eyes staring right into him.

All he could see were the teeth.

Then the flashlight died.

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APPEAL

by Gareth A. Williams

They put up the yellow sign within hours of the accident. It was a serious accident, apparently, at 1:30am on the tenth of this month. Witnesses sought; a phone number given. Somebody, please help me.

The first flowers arrived next day, late-evening, not long before the sun set on another hot day. They were hand-delivered by (I would say) the grieving mother. She arrived alone and on foot. No father on the scene, then. In the crook of one fat arm she sported a worn, leather handbag which banged against her fat thigh as she walked along the cycle path, struggling with the oversized bouquet. I could see a reservoir of sweat building on her forehead in spite of a cooling breeze that had her cheap summer dress flapping angrily round her fat ankles. She dumped the lilies, with visible relief, at the foot of the tree, straightened her back and sighed. Then, something having caught her notice, she bent down again and made an adjustment – a message, a card, not quite in its place. 'To my Craigy,' it said. 'To my angel, with love.' She stood back and admired the flowers one more time. Then she turned and walked back down the lane, ill at ease on her own. I wondered, briefly, what was running through her head: if only Craigy had stayed in last night, instead of hanging out with those so-called mates; if only he had not been speeding; if only he hadn't been so

wayward in recent years. He'd been a bugger since his dad left.

I inspected the flowers. They'd probably last about a week before they curled up and rotted under Craigy's tree. Not a great epitaph, when all was said and done.

I recalled a time not long since when there was another yellow sign down Flowers Lane; another appeal for witnesses, another collection of daffodils and lilies. It made front page:

ACCIDENT BLACK SPOT STRIKES AGAIN.

I remember, on that occasion, there was a witness: a girl of seventeen in the passenger seat. She suffered multiple breaks to her neck and spine, and couldn't feel a thing below her shoulders. They reckoned the shock was too much for her, because she seemed to lose her mind in her hospital bed. She took three days to die, rambling on and on about some 'dead kid'. The absolute stillness of her body accentuated the frenetic madness of her slaver-filled face. 'The dead kid... why didn't he see us? He just pulled out…'

'Dead kid?' asked the nurse, who at that moment was trying to wipe the slobber from the girl's face. She neither wanted nor expected an answer; the question was automatic, the result of a well-drilled bedside manner. 'I'm just going to brush your teeth, love.'

'Swerved straight at us…Stop!'

She was never told what happened to her boyfriend; about his final, agonising minutes impaled like a party cocktail sausage on a wooden fence-post in a shit-smeared field.

The coroner (almost certainly impatient to make a lunch appointment) concluded it was down to speed. The lad driving was the type: chav-tastic Adidas sportswear and an in-car sound system that belted out moronic techno crap long after the Fiesta had disintegrated on impact with the field boundary.

This was in the paper three months ago:

COUNCIL AT A LOSS OVER ROAD TRAGEDIES

Council Leader Ian Pollard has described the meteoric rise in deaths along an accident black

spot as 'inexplicable'. The stretch of the b-road known as Flowers Lane has claimed eight lives in the past year.

'Although all the deaths are tragic,' said Cllr Pollard, 58, 'The road has recently been resurfaced, the speed limit has been lowered and automatic 'SLOW DOWN' signs have been installed. There's little else we can do.'

Eight lives in a year. Now the figure stood at eleven, and was about to get worse. Even if I'd known what was going to happen, there was little I could do about it. I needed a witness; someone who could help me.

* * *

I carefully adjust my pedal straps (I like them nice and snug so they don't distract me from riding) and I push off into the gradually descending gloom. The secret of good road-speed is establishing a rhythm – left, right, left, right - a metronomic, subconscious pounding, gradually building the beat, building the pace, ignoring the oxygen debt, the screaming in the calves, the fire in the lungs. My head stays absolutely still, eyes focused on the road ahead. Left, right, left, right. I race through the gears, almost at full speed now. I hear the familiar fizzing of my tyres negotiating the tarmac road-surface, steadily rising in pitch as my velocity increases. I lean to the right, into the bend at the top of Flowers Lane and only now, briefly, allow myself to free-wheel. I suck in air in violent gasps, enjoying the respite and preparing to resume pedalling as the road straightens out. But an insidious rumbling begins to invade my consciousness. I know it's up ahead but before I can work out what it is I see it: the sporty Nova appears on my side of the road, taking the 'racing line'. Showing no signs of slowing, the driver has obviously yet to pick me out in the headlights. I find this surprising as I must cut a ghostly figure in my reflective gear. I wait for the expected tyre-scream as the brakes lock, but it doesn't happen. It keeps coming and coming, heading straight for me. The moment of decision arrives: the car is not going to deviate. I panic and pull my handlebars hard right, swerving so violently into the

middle of the road that I struggle to stay in the saddle. Only now do I hear the screeching. Too late, the driver realises he is about to mount the cycle path. I clearly see him mouth the word 'Shit!' He swings the wheel round, but bounces off the kerb before heading back towards me. The thing about swerving is you can only do it once. Having already shot my bolt, I can do nothing but watch.

* * *

Somebody, please help me.

What do you think about in the micro-seconds after impact? The final golden moments before your life ebbs away? I've replayed the moment again and again but it doesn't get any wittier. I looked up expecting to see the stationary car, the only sign of life the idle tick, tick of the engine and the driver's wide eyes staring at me through the rear window. In another second, he would regain his composure, spectacularly rev his engine and set off as fast as he could. 'Bastard,' I thought. 'You sod.'

But when I looked, the Nova wasn't there. There was no traffic at all. I was alone in the road.

That, at least, was my initial impression. But something caught my eye on the cycle path; I peered through the gloom and made out a scene of devastation. A Fiat Punto had inexplicably swerved from the road, crossed the cycle path and smashed into a steel signpost. The car's chasse had crumpled like foil, while the post remained unmoved, standing proud and tall above the debris, more or less where the driver would be. What I saw was eerily illuminated by steady flashes of orange light. 'Slow Down,' the sign was saying. 'Slow Down.'

Flowers Lane was made infamous last April when 14-year-old Lucas Burgess became the first casualty along that stretch. He was knocked off his bicycle by a hit and run driver who remains at large. A brown Vauxhall Nova was seen speeding from the scene. Lucas, who was a promising cyclist and tipped for success in the 2012 Olympics, became the symbol of a road safety campaign run by his father, Tom Burgess. This campaign culminated in the introduction of automatic speed signs at the exact spot where Lucas died.

I moved closer to the Punto, expecting the worst, and as I approached my fears were realised. What struck me most was the complete silence. By some fluke, both the car's windscreen and rear-view mirror were still attached to each other, although neither retained any trace of glass. Swinging from the mirror was an air freshener, the smell of which had evaporated weeks ago. It had a distinctive design; five bicycle wheels parodying the Olympic flag. It was a memento picked up at the Manchester Velodrome last year. Dad was so excited; so obviously proud. He placed it on the mirror with due ceremony, as if placing a medal on a victorious athlete bowed before him. He said I'd be able to hang my medal there one day.

Dad was such a careful driver, a road safety campaigner. It was inconceivable he could die at the same spot as me. And to die because of me, well that was too much to bear. What hell was this? Somebody, please help me: a witness is sought to my killer's bloody secret.

* * *

I push off and instantly pick up a rhythm. Left, right, left, right. There is no joy in this, but no pain no gain. Up ahead I hear the distinctive rumbling of the Nova and look up to see it once more heading straight towards me.

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OBEAHMAN

by Maya McLaughlin

He watched the long shaft of sunlight fall across the room like a Zulu's spear. The noise of the hut coming to life pulled his mind fully from the mystical embrace of slumber and lazily he swung his legs out of the bed.

He listened a while to the strident tones of his wife ordering her children around. 'Man caint git no peace,' he muttered to himself peevishly.

With the children dispatched to their various chores and his wife gone to clean other folk's houses, the place became silent once more. He sighed like a man sorely tried and dipped a wooden ladle into the calabash of fresh water his wife brought up from the stream every morning and drank deeply of its cool sweetness. Replacing the ladle he moved across to the battered stove to see if the coffeepot was still warm. Then he noticed it. Lying unobtrusively and half-hidden by the grubby gingham skirt the cooker wore. Tentatively he stretched out a hand before pulling it back and shuddering. He knew what it was. 'She hex me.'

He threw on his clothes and stepped out into the harsh brightness of the noontime veldt. At this time of day with all the able-bodied men in the fields, the women labouring at their endless jobs and the children either in the schoolhouse or helping their parents, the village was quiet with only the old ones and babies around. He

ran fly, sullen, jet-black eyes along the row of huts allowing them to rest on the very last one which housed the Obeahman. He sent vicious darts of anger to both his wife and the shaman. 'Whyn't she speak to me? She coulda come to me first.'

Because he was used to lying to both others and himself, this statement did not seem in any way incongruous to him and he conveniently forgot all the times she had approached him, a problem with one of the children, lack of money – she was always complaining too. She was tired, she was ill, her eyes hurt, her back hurt. Lucky for her she had a man who was patient. Never once had he hit her – well not properly anyway. Leastways not the way you'd hit a man but she bruised easy although sometimes he'd swear she doctored them bruises right up so's they looked worse. And instead of hiding herself away until they faded, the woman was brazen, parading herself around the village with the marks he'd put on her freely on show. 'Shameless.' She was a good worker though, he'd give her that. But he wasn't so bad, not like she painted it. Didn't he always put food on the table whenever he won at cards and didn't he never, ever hit her unless she deserved it? 'Aint no reason fo' a hex.' She'd gone too far this time.

He went back inside and squatted down, studying the fetish lying there on the kitchen floor. It was wrapped up in a tight ball of grass and delicately laced with cobwebs. What was in there? A lock of his hair perhaps? He ran a hand across his skull looking for a bald spot where she could have shaved off his hair in the night. Or maybe some nail clippings? He studied his hands and feet carefully. Hadn't she clipped his nails for him only a few nights before? He pushed his face as close as he dared but the bundle offered no clue and he could not risk empowering the hex further by laying his hands upon it. What if he ignored it? Would the hex disappear? 'A hex is a hex,' he decided and since the thing was hidden he wasn't expected to find it so from that he understood it didn't matter if he noticed it or not. A hex is a hex. His sly brain cartwheeled around in his head. He had to see the Obeahman and convince him to take the curse away. He took a deep breath and stepped into the sunlight again.

'Hex caint never be taken 'way,' the shaman said 'but it can be returned to he who sent it.'

'Or she.'

'Or she,' the Obeahman agreed 'except I ain't never put no hex on you and your wife never ask me to.'

'You lying!' he trembled, feeling a cold sweat prickle uncomfortably on his warm body.

'I don't need to lie,' the shaman said simply 'there is no hex, plain and simple.'

He left the hut with real fear now lodged in his belly. Was the Obeahman telling the truth? He offered money – more money than she could ever have paid – but still the man said no. He offered then his one good milking cow, his goat and half a year's profit from his wife's vegetable garden, but the Obeahman shook his head. In desperation he offered Msoto his eldest daughter fourteen now and ripe, but the Obeahman did not change his mind. 'Go home fool,' he'd said.

The fetish lay innocently on the floor and he wondered if it had the power to see him, to watch him and to know exactly when it's power was going to kill him? He ran out of the hut and away from the village towards the town where he knew she'd be working. If he'd been thinking rationally he'd have known he never did listen to her chatterings long enough to know which house she'd be cleaning that day, but his mind was most irrational. Obeah gets you that way.

Unused to exertion, he was forced to slow his pace but the sweat still poured out of his body, from every orifice it flowed freely, his tongue was dry as dust and his heart hammered in his scrawny chest. Then his head began to spin, faster it went and pulsating too and he veered off the dirt track road into the wide-open veldt. His eyes saw yellow all around and his breathing came ragged and laboured. He lay face down in the coarse patchy scrub and a fierce stabbing pain made him clutch at his heart. He let his breath go slowly, trying to ease both panic and pain but the pain stabbed at him harder and the woolly yellow mist thickened before his eyes. Then the mist separated, became two distinctive shapes

which loomed threateningly before him more hideous than he could ever imagine and he shut them out with his eyes. Too late, he remembered the frail human eyelid is no match for Obeah mist and his fly, lazy eyes froze open in their final horror.

It was dusk by the time she got home. She sat down heavily on a stool in the small kitchen, her mind busy wondering what would fill their bellies tonight. She caught sight of something poking out from underneath the stove. She flicked a foot at it but it didn't move. Easing her tired bones downwards she squatted on the floor and pulled out a clump of dirty dried grass. 'Msoto,' she called 'you bin lettin' the goat git inside the house again?'

***

Despite the way he was with her she missed him. Although living with him was like living on a knife-edge, she missed him. When they found his body, what was left of it after the hyenas and vultures filled their bellies, she'd taken him home and prepared his remains for burial with her own hands. She would let no one near him and even when her children were driven from the hut by the smell of their father's rotting carcass she took no heed. She washed the dirt and dried blood from what remained of his flesh and carefully pasted the scant ribbons of skin back on to his bones with a mixture of water, flour and an egg. She examined her work carefully. There were huge gaps of missing flesh and in truth he no longer looked like a man at all but like a raw lump of putrid meat fit only to be flung to the dogs.

However he looked he was her man and he had loved her in his fashion. She ran a hand over the few wisps of hair which stuck stubbornly to the skin she'd pressed in place on his scalp - and she had loved him too. They'd had their fights and he wasn't slow to raise his hand, her mind too quick and honest to fool herself. Almost lovingly she caressed the yellowing bruise on her neck, his last gift to her. But all in all and whatever he was he didn't deserve to die like that. No one did. Frowning, she gave the body a final examination before taking the sheet from their bed and binding him

in it. She folded the linen carefully around him and a primal groan rose up in her breast when she pulled the top down to cover his face.

'Papa was no loving man,' Msoto said gently pulling her mother away from the body that once housed her father. 'Don't cry no mo' Mama. We'll be all right.'

She nodded. She would carry on her cleaning jobs in the town, and Msoto would tend the garden selling the vegetables they grew there and looking after the younger ones. But then wasn't that always how it has been? Now he was gone what would really change? She cast a long, languid eye across the empty bed.

It took three days for her to give up the body for burial and when they tried to lift it the carcass fell to pieces inside the shroud. She listened to the noise of his jumbling bones as they carried him away.

But life went on. She had seven children to raise and no man to help her do it. 'But he never helped you anyway,' said Msoto, but her mother turned her ears and eyes away.

When he had been dead for a year and his anniversary went unmarked the people of the village became concerned and, as with everything, their fears were taken to the Obeahman who walked along the row of huts to her place with the people following behind.

'You want him back?' he said to her.

She nodded.

'Even the way he was?'

They all knew the Obeahman's powers were great but this was astonishing even for him.

'Cain I have him?' she whispered.

'Hasta be sure. Aint always a good thing.'

She didn't hesitate. 'I do.'

'Mama,' Msoto cried 'careful what you say. Remember what he was like – in the end,' the child saw again the nightmare vision of her father's fetid corpse.

'Want him any way I cain git him.'

'Then all right.' The Obeahman went away.

She couldn't sleep that night and when she heard soft snuffling noises coming from the other room she knew her daughter couldn't sleep either. She watched the doorway expecting to see him appear in the darkness of night. His condition didn't concern her for hadn't she lived with his body a full three days before they forced her to put him in a hole in the ground? He was her man and there was no way at all she wouldn't take him.

Msoto wouldn't lie down. How could she rest when she knew the Obeahman would send him back. Like her mother her eyes too were riveted on the doorway.

Msoto must have fallen asleep eventually for when she opened her eyes it was daylight. She moved carefully through the sleeping bodies of her siblings and stood outside her mother's room. The door was closed although she saw her mother leave it ajar the night before. 'Make it easier for your father,' she'd said by way of explanation.

Could he really do it? Could the Obeahman raise the dead? Msoto didn't want to find out but she drew in a deep breath bravely and slowly pushed open the door.

The room was unchanged. The clothes hung on their usual nails, making the same zigzagging shapes they always did across the sunlit floor. Moving forward Msoto steeled herself to look at the bed. There was a lump nestling under the blanket. A singular shape. She sighed heavily in relief. The Obeahman's spell had failed. Just to make certain she pulled back the rough curtain on the window, in case her father was hiding there. She even checked in the drawers and her mother's wicker basket. Satisfied she went to rouse her mother.

'Mama wake up –'she pulled back in horror as her mother's face, wearing the frozen mask of death, stared unseeingly back.

***

She had to find a husband, a good man who would take care of her brothers and sisters and in return for this she would work hard for him, just as her mother had done all her life. She'd never give her heart to him though. Msoto would learn from her mother's mis-

take.

She ran her mind across all the eligible young men in the village and when she realised none of them were likely to take her on she widened her search to include older men and widowers, men who would welcome the attentions of a healthy fourteen-year-old wife and who had enough experience of life to understand that such a prize did not come without appendages. There was one whom her mind kept returning to. Igbo. As old as her father and with twice as many children, Msoto knew it would not be an easy life but she also knew she could not remain in the village alone and without male protection. With this thought singularly spinning in her head she left her brothers and sisters at home and went to the Obeahman.

She stood at his door patiently until he chose to notice her. She looked calmly in his eye and made her request. 'I need to marry and quickly, Papa,' she said simply.

The Obeahman nodded his wild nest of woolly greying hair at her. 'Who you see child?'

'Igbo.'

If the shaman was surprised at her choice he gave no indication of it. 'He looking?'

'Does it matter?'

The Obeahman threw his head back and laughed. He opened his door further and Msoto stepped into the house.

It was when she was weeding her mother's vegetable garden that he walked by. She pounded the hoe rhythmically into the cracked dry earth and by affecting to ignore his presence, allowed him to view her lithe, black limbs as she worked. It was noon, an unusual time of day to see a working man in the village. He stood by the edge of her garden. 'Hello Father,' she said eventually, and she spoke respectfully her eyes not rising above his chest.

'Looking for a wife. I have plenty daughters at home,' he said in return.

Msoto smiled quietly, long fingers of her dirt-covered hand covering her mouth.

Her life was a mirror image of that of her mother's except that Igbo was not as demanding of her as her father had been to her

mother. He bothered her infrequently and the marital bed stood largely unused, as he preferred to curl himself tightly in a blanket and sleep on the floor. Msoto used her body, the only tool she had and she worked long hours with it digging and planting both her mother's garden and now her husband's, she tended to all his children, the eldest of whom was only a year younger than she, and in this way she kept a safe roof over the heads of her siblings.

When a full season had passed and she deemed herself ready she went to speak to her husband. 'I want a child,' she said.

'Enough in this house already,' Igbo replied 'and I 'way too old bring another child in this world.' He underlined his feelings by abandoning the marital bed completely.

'He won't give me a child, Papa and I need to be a mother,' she said to the Obeahman.

Yellow-flecked leonine eyes bored silently into her, stripping bare her soul and he let her into the house. 'I put him in dreamtime. Then his body do what you want.'

'How this happen?' Igbo cried when he noticed her softly swelling body, and when she made him no answer he angrily left the house. His wife had disobeyed him. 'I want hex her,' he said to the Obeahman 'wife belly fill with another man child.' When he returned his step was light, his head clear and free and he rolled the small fetish the shaman had given him around in his palm. He placed it hidden in the house, just as the Obeahman said and set off for the fields where he worked his strong body until sunset.

When her time came she took herself away from the village and laid down in the scant shade of a twig-like tree. She returned in the evening with the child wrapped in a bloody cloth.

'I kep' your family, put food in they belly and ain't no complain 'cause they already livin' on God's earth but what you done is a bad thing, bringing a baby in the world aint wanted,' he pushed past her roughly and refused to look at the baby in her arms.

'Help me Papa,' she said to the Obeahman 'this child bring nothing but trouble.'

'Child ain't the trouble,' replied the shaman evenly.

She pressed the bundle into his arms and hurried away and

when she returned to the house without the baby her husband made no mention of it. The pain in her belly began soon after she made the evening meal and, abandoning her food, she crept to her bed and lay down.

He could almost feel the fetish in the house. It seemed to sing to him from its hiding place and more than once he sneaked away to check on it. Made up from clandestinely collected and microscopic body parts and bound together with a piece of her dress and incantations, it nestled innocently in the marital bed no longer used. He knew she'd never find it there. 'Do your work,' he whispered urgently to it 'take her and her cheating man away.' Without error he carefully recited the sacred words the Obeahman had given him and lay down to sleep.

Msoto was in agony now. The pain travelled relentlessly upwards and coiled around her heart, squeezing it like a vice, and she fell back, heart hammering violently in her chest until it hammered no more.

Fear fired him out of his slumber in the dead of night and he sat bolt upright shivering in his blanket. He saw himself asleep and deep in dreams, entwined in his blanket. He saw himself unmoving except the one part of him which responded to her silent ministrations. He heard the secret words she whispered in his ear, words that kept his spirit from returning to his body while she pulled herself astride him…

His return to consciousness was fleeting, just long enough for him to know what he'd done before he collapsed on his blanket, and when death hardened the body his face kept its eerie look of surprise.

The Obeahman took the news quite calmly when the ragged group of children appeared at his door stunned and dry-eyed in shock over the unexplainable deaths of their father and young stepmother.

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A (SOMETHING) IN WARDOUR STREET

by Franklin Marsh

Martin stumbled out of The Marquee, seething. He zipped up his studded leather jacket and glanced up at the warm drizzle. What a crap night! Not only was his spiky hair about to get flattened, but the soap used to stick it up would probably be revealed. And his heroes hadn't even turned up. Bollocks!

He glanced quickly up and down. Good! No skins or soulies hanging around. He could probably get an early train and miss the beer monsters and the worst of the drunkies. As he had time, he decided to head up to Oxford Street. He didn't fancy threading his way through Leicester Square on his own. Too many addicts, winos and glue sniffers.

All that money! Train fare, tube fare, burgers, fags, booze. All for nothing! Good job he'd ponced a bit on the way up. Couldn't believe those flash tourists had bunged him a fiver for a photo. Everything going great and The bloody Obnoxious don't show. An evening with Venusian Frug. Gawd, how he hated their jangling row. A couple of nice birds in short skirts gyrating down the front was scant compensation. When he found his foot tapping to their cover of Love Me Do it was time to go. And the bouncer had sussed he'd hidden his pint under his jacket on the way out. Well, fu….

''Ello Sonny! Lookin' for business?'

He jumped a mile. And felt his gorge rise as the temptress

became a pancaked harridan by stepping into the light.

'Is your Johnny Rotten?' wheezed the battleaxe, and a forty a day for too long cackle assaulted Martin's ears. He racked his brain for a suitable Oscar Wilde reply. The trusty Fuck Off You Old Bag sprang to mind.

As his upper teeth straddled his lower lip, a plastic streamer waterfall parted like the Red Sea and an amazingly large man leaned out of the 'bookshop'.

'Alright, Gaye?'

'Alright, Trev. Just another little punk who can't raise it – the cash that is.'

The raucous laughter brayed out as the man mountain looked at Martin and jerked a thumb.

'Fuck off Sonny. If you know what's good for you.'

Martin affected a man of the world shrug and mooched off.

Sonny?! If anyone else…

''Scuse me Sonny.'

He jumped again, stopped, rolled his eyes skyward, closed them, clenched his fists, swivelled on a Doc Marten heel, sighed a deep sigh and opened his eyes downward.

He then surveyed the speaker from toes to tonsure.

Black winklepickers. Black drainpipes. A black velvet smoking-jacket. Black cravat. Long, wavy grey hair. A very white face, dark around the eyes. Martin stared – was the old galoot wearing make-up?

As a black-gloved hand reached out and stroked his leather jacket, Martin's heart leaped. A pouf! Time to regain some self-esteem!

The right clenched fist gravitated to the right hip. The left arm assumed teapot spout position.

'I'm free!' falsettoed. A mincing dance around the old black scarecrow.

''Smatter granddad? Early doors at the Rocky Horror Show? You dirty old que..'

As Martin completed his circumnavigation his right fist flew towards the

YOUCH!

Freeze Frame.

An incredibly tight iron band was squeezing his right arm just above the elbow. He glanced down. It was the old boy's hand.

'Kinell! He was strong. And fast. Martin hadn't seen him move.

He looked into the white face. Something about the eyes…Red irises! Contact lenses? No, must be an albino. Couldn't be. His hair was grey, not white.

Martin felt faint and dizzy. His feet seemed to leave the ground. The grinning madman held his gaze. It was as though they were in a lift. Ladies and gentlemen, we are floating in space! Everything seemed to be fuzzy around the edges…

His feet touched solid ground again and the grip on his arm was released. He staggered back until he bumped into a wall. Looking around he realised that the two of them were on a flat roof. Distant traffic sounds and music drifted up to them. He turned to the black clad stranger and fell under the spell of those eyes again.

'Queer, you were going to say?' sneered the old man as he approached Martin and placed his hands on the boys shoulders.

Martin was powerless. He was aware – but paralysed.

'Don't worry Sonny. I'm not after your meat and two veg.'

A knee rocketed into Martin's groin. He squeaked and his eyes crossed and watered. As he began to lean forward, a bony finger was placed under his chin and he was manoeuvred back to the vertical. Those eyes!

'I could do with *one* of your bodily fluids, though.'

As the old man leaned forward, Martin panicked internally. The old bastard was gay! Shit! I'm straight! I've been with a girl! Twice! What if I like it? Heeellllpppppp!!!!

Two red hot darts pierced his neck. After the initial shock, Martin felt suffused with a warm glow. This was nice! And it didn't hurt! His reverie was interrupted by a sloppy slurping sound, as though someone nearby was attempting a down-in-one.

Martin sighed happily as the black velvet arms encircled him,

and bore him gently to the ground. If this was homosexuality, bring it on! He was so tired. He'd just push up a few zeds and then get off home.

The weight on top of him shifted, and he glanced up at the figure in black.

Where had the old man gone? This character was dressed identically, but had long, wavy black hair (with distinguished grey sideboards.) The white and black panda face , now slashed with red, seemed less lined.

'Gaaaahh!!'

A hawk and a pfffttt. A warm wet globule struck Martin's chest. He looked down and saw the purpley-red splotch on the black and white photo. His prized Sid Vicious Dead t-shirt! But somehow he didn't mind.

'Taste of your own medicine, eh? You've been on that bloody snakebite. Just when I could have done with a light and bitter.'

The new apparition licked its lips with a raspberry tongue.

'Still, I don't think you've any other junk in your system. I've had worse.'

Martin decided that this bloke was the old codger's son.. They worked together. The old man led you on and the son….did what he did. A momentary pang of discomfort as the new man in black's hand delved into the rocker's jeans. But it was only to empty the pockets. They were muggers! Martin couldn't imagine his *own* dad joining him in a crime spree.

The mugger examined his haul.

'Snotty hanky. 13p. No surprise there. Student railcard. Student?! So you're not even on the bloody dole, you fraud! Cor blimey! I'll tell you what I don't get about you lot. All this protest. All these things to say. And you can't hear a bloody word! It's all dadadadadadadada. All sounds the same. And for people who want to be different you all look the same. You should listen to some real music, Son. Beethoven, Brahms..'

'Beautiful people,' whispered Martin.

The night creature moved toward him once more.

'Nope, you just won't do. Punk's not dead mate – but you are.'

Martin revelled in the same sensations as before, but in a muted way. He was so warm and comfortable. He must be at home in bed, dreaming. His eyelids fluttered open and confirmed it. The white face was turning black. The ears growing huge and upward. The whole form was shrinking. The eyes were now completely crimson. The face had assumed a fox-like shape. An intrepid fox! As Martin began to drift he heard a familiar voice.

'The only one of your lot I've got any time for is The Damned. Great name. Good for a laugh. And their singer! Immaculately turned out!'

A red eye winked.

The voice grew fainter.

'God Save The Queen , my arse! Nnnnooooooo future for you…..'

A flapping of leathery wings and they were both gone.

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JACOB RAFFLES

by James Stanger

I study the blackness deeper and deeper until it surrenders vague shapes of sharp corners where the walls meet the ceiling. There is a bucket in the corner of the room directly below the cold stainless steel unit collecting water from the dripping sink. It emits a hollow ting…ting…ting.

I rest my head on the pillow of a bed that is woven from guilt and disgraceful morals and stare at the silver moonlight that strikes through the iron bars of the box shaped window.

Do I regret my crimes? Is there a wish for redemption wrestling within my conscious?

NO!

England had become a waste ground of social cripples and desperate solutions. One by one modern ways fell in a gradual decomposition of society. Technology failed its makers. The cybernetic cogs stopped and the country's civilisation held its breath in the chaos of the unknown.

This was shortly followed by the death of black gold. Machines could not function. The populous began to starve with no means of farming and without the ability to transport food.

The authorities clashed with civilians in cataclysmic riots. Blood filled the streets: a thousands tales of horror and brutality were written into the land in a matter of months.

Order could not be reinstated with force, so England's government placed hallucinogenic drugs into official food aid. After a few weeks the country had its fury erased and replaced with calming passive visions.

The few who lived off the land or managed to farm their own food witnessed the enslavement of England's people. The Prime Minister found them prime pickings to rebuild the country back to glory.

I was one myself and a few strugglers were hounded and persuaded by violent military groups called The Neutralisers. Their main objective was to incapacitate strugglers and pacify them so they could be used as fodder in slavery. I evaded capture a number of times until the day came where I was the last of a band of strugglers. I was caught on a desolated stretch of motorway.

Due to my resistance and past bid for freedom I was no longer seen as suitable for slavery because of my strength of spirit. I was placed into a special jail for the sake of 'social balance and glory'.

The punishment was death in one of the country's battle torn fields. I was told I would hang from one of the trees and give back something to the world.

I do fear my own death, the end of my own world. I fear the chilling lonesome death about to be bestowed upon me. I also dread meeting him.

The Hangman.

The grim sensations he would create come the dawn entwined tightly within the hemp of the noose. I shut my eyes and wish I could drift off to sleep. Unlike Death, it would not submerge me forever in absolute cold darkness.

The wispy night flickers like a negative candle burning its freezing flame. It decays ever downward and its black light is eventually thawed by the warmth of morning's bright light. I am awoken by the brash metallic banging of my cell door and the brutal vocals of the prison warder.

'Right, get up! Slop out time. Wakey! Wakey!'

Then the clamor fades. It is quiet again. My eyes rest on the still, stinking bucket and I venture out to empty the filth inside. My

hollow steps echo against the prison wall corridors; soulless empty footsteps accompanied by an equally soulless and empty prison warder.

Even at these moments out of my solitary confinement I am not permitted to mix with the other inmates. In the past, there were vicious riots and protests. After such a harsh lesson the governors of these prisons feared conspiracy within the ranks of the captives and a warder would always accompany us, like twisted guardian angels.

The prison inside is like a stainless steel base mold. The air is filtered and the water pumped in from a private source. There is little hope of escape and the guards let you know the punishment of trying.

Far below the network of staircases there is an open area called the Beating Ground, a place set aside for the guards to drag out unruly prisoners and thrash them mercilessly.

The guards don't need a reason to take you to such a place. It is well known to every incarcerated man that at any given moment you could be the target of a guard's wrath.

I shortly return to my cell and wander, not feeling the floor beneath my feet. My mind has taken to auto-pilot. I just do what I have to. Everything now seems utterly pointless. I am in the last hours of my countdown to extinction and nothing I can do or say could change my fate. In a strange way my future never looked more secure than it does now.

Everything has been taken care of for me. There are no surprises and no other turnings on the road to my death march. I can see into the future. I am a prophet whose word you can believe and whose descent into decay you can be assured of.

The Guard flips the peep shutter on the door and I see a pair of eyes screech across the inside of my room followed by a gruff harsh voice.

'He has come to measure you up'.

Then the door opens to reveal a tall, thin and black suited man. He is gaunt like a stone gargoyle. This is the hangman, the man who could connect me with the ever after.

He steps into the cell and with a gestured gloved hand he introduces himself.

'A pleasure to meet you sir, I am your Hangman.'

He gestures his hand for me to shake in what seems a politely macabre ritual and for a man about to administer my death in my final dark hours his demeanor is unusually subservient.

'Do you have a name?' I inquire.

'Call me what you may. I have no single identity to name myself. That would force me into the shell of a solo entity.' The hangman replies.

I'm not sure if the gentleman speaks in such a fashion to be purposely conceited or if there is something far more fantastic to his existence than at first appeared. The Hangman places a medium sized leather bound suitcase on my battered wooden table and delicately unfastens the brass clasps.

Inside is a lining of pristine smooth purple silk. It acts as a regal cushion for his instruments that looks to be made for measurement and note taking. In the centre is a face shaped item wrapped tightly in the same purple velvet and knotted in tight silver ribbon.

It is dark comedy to know that at least I'm not to be assisted to final sleep by a hack or amateur. This man is intensive and prestigious with his profession of life taker extraordinaire.

He pauses, turns to me and speaks.

'I suppose if you wish for a name to attach to me you may call me Jacob Raffles.' He tells me with a clinical smile.

'Is this your name then?'

'As I said I am not trapped by names but that sounds like a good one to be known by if I so wished.'

Jacob stops using his arcane tools and turns his attention to the face shaped object in the suitcase and proceeds to unravel the silver ribbon. Gently he unwraps. It is a mask revealed before me with a gaping mouth of vines and leaves nourishing the cavity. The hollowed out eyes are surrounded by thick and ripe foliage. They wrap themselves around the eyeholes like photosynthetic tendrils.

Every blessing of green hue decorates its surface with plush

live majesty. The detail is superb, etched with unworldly markings and tiny insignia that I have no idea how to understand. The mouth disturbs me, its gaping mouth a theater of grinning mockery for whomever choose to look upon it.

'What does the mask mean?' I ask.

'What do you mean? The cryptic patterns and markings?' Jacob replies. 'The face is from ancient Celtic mythology of the Green-man: a God representing fertility and the personification of hunting and the Forest'.

'And the leaves and vines?'

'These depict seasons and change.' He carries on. 'The seasons commence with spring the symbol of hope and new life and conclude with winter the symbol of despair and...'

DEATH!!

There is no need for Jacob to finish as I know the end of the sentence.

'Yes, a lonely situation that you will no doubt find yourself in soon enough.' he remarks.

We speak in the last hour of my existence and Jacob talks about how many people had raped nature feeding from her bounty and exploiting her for financial gain. Strange, you may think? Not for this fellow.

'My, my. Your moment awaits you, young man.' Jacob examines his pocket-watch.

However my curiosity has been ignited and burns. I have to know more about the enigma behind the mask. I seize my chance and reach out to touch it whilst Jacob pounds time.

As my skin contacts the skin of the face I experience cataclysm and geniuses in bleak graceful synergy. I feel rainfall and sunlight, thunder cracks and birdsong, harvest and starvation.

Birth and decay.

Jacob turns to me and withdraws my hand. He smiles knowingly and places the mask softly upon his face. My body now static and calm, I feel drowsy but not distressed. A cool numbness paralyses my body. All I can do is breathe.

My vision dims. Shade usurps my eyesight tenderly, but

before I lose all vision I manage to look upon the visage of the mask one last time.

This was not my death however, for I awake and am chained naked to a tree, confusion twinned with disorientation makes me reel and shriek with a fearful instinct one only learns from birth.

The final pieces of the insidious jigsaw are at last being put into position. I look up at the branches of the tree to see that they are black and snapped bare of leaves and reaching into the cold merciless sky.

I peer down to find a man clad in black robes flapping in the wind. He shouts aloud from a leather bound book, his long raven hair flickering around his eyes. Then next to him is Jacob Raffles, his mask upon his face like it is his true identity with his sinister grin aimed towards my gasping face.

As the rain beats down upon my naked body he places his hand on the tree and bellows into the air. I begin to yell and look around hopelessly for a sign of rescue, only to see row upon row of dead trees with twisted branches and long forgotten axe wounds.

Jacob touches my thigh and once more I am linked to the natural elements and no longer hear the robed man with his erratic uttering. I cannot even hear Jacob's maniacal shouting. Even my

own screams are silent now.

They are all replaced by the squeals of the wide mouthed trees, each and every one of them crying. Oaks, birch, chestnuts, even tiny saplings have their own audio protests of past and present pain. I can even hear the tiny yelps from the trampled grass.

Within this tempest of torture my wide horrified eyes peer down my body and bear witness to the ancient splinter bark opening up like an open wound but devouring my anatomy like hungry jaws.

I can feel no hurt or discomfort apart from the gradual sapping of my energy. My limbs once so strong and my heart once so powerful now weeping in the discovery of frailty.

The salty tears cascading down my face meet with the rain fall and I notice Jacob's face: for his mask was not a mask it is his natural face, real and calling to the outraged heavens.

The robed man falls to his knees. His face is red with gnashing teeth and he claws the soil in a crazed mindset as I sink further and further into the belly of the tree until only my face remains. I feel hazy and fuzzy entombed in the tree until...

SILENCE .

The warm sun breaks the night to form a new day, sprawling its rays upon the dewy grass and the forest of dead trees. As I gaze into the light of the sun, my arms feed in its glow. I feel stronger. Jacob has left along with the robed man. I feel life and the glistening hum of nature as I look down onto one of my fingers and notice a sparrow building a nest. My brothers around me still ache for life but soon Jacob Raffles shall return and bring back life to death. Joy to those who have suffered, for Nature's legion shall grow again.

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THE INN

by SF Stewart

I had travelled for many hours in the blackness, with a watchful pale moon above me, and as it grew colder I hoped for a place to break my journey. The men and the horses were tired, and an eerie stillness had fallen over the landscape, bringing with it an icy chill. We passed a graveyard, and there the horses brayed, and would go no further: and though I am not a superstitious man, a needle of fear pierced me, and I drew my cloak tighter about my shoulders.

The men were noisy, I think to ward off their own nerves, and a great clattering commenced as they re-harnessed the horses - as if with each stamp of the boot, and crack of the leather, one could remind the chill landscape that we were its masters. We stayed too long there, I think, and as the men worked I fancied I saw a tall shadow creep along the graveyard wall, a fast stealthy shadow that made me catch my breath. I closed my eyes, and told myself I was merely tired, but the loathsome image remained behind my eyelids, and I knew I would get no sleep that night.

We drew on, speedier now, the animals and the men on edge. A thin patter of rain began to fall and the temperature dropped further still - and yet there was no wind at all, a still sinister night it was, just as quiet as a corpse.

The inn, when first I glimpsed it, was of a horrid aspect. It

stood quite alone, in great fields of darkness not yet scarred by roads or paths: a sluggish, wide river ran alongside it, and the grounds were covered in jagged trees. Three times we tried to reach it, and three times we were thwarted; each path seemed to end abruptly, one with a fallen tree-trunk sprouting foul weeds, one with a flooded pond that glittered blackly at us, and the third time we were met with a wall, inexplicable, eight feet high. I felt most uneasy, and ordered the men back, but it was no use. Lightning flashed, cracking open the dark skies, and the dreadful house stood before us, vivid, stark against the sky. I knew not how, but we had arrived at the side of it in our confusion, and never realised.

We knocked, and there came no reply. The rain was hard now, cold, drumming rain, so I smote upon the door a second time: 'Is there anybody there?' I said.

No answer still, just the sound of the rain, the horses' rapid breathing, the men quiet. My heart began to race as I looked up. At the window I saw a face. A white face, the face of a tired woman. I did not feel afraid of her, but as she moved away from the window the horses whinnied again, and reared up; and by the time she opened the door they were rolling their eyes and foaming at the mouth.

We made the necessary arrangements, and the stabled the horses, and I fell into bed quite exhausted.

I awoke shortly before dawn to hear a strange scratching. Rigid with fear, I listened, and it intensified; and with it came a wild keening, as though somewhere. far away, a wounded child was howling. I lit a candle and thrust it towards the furthest corner of the room, but could discern nothing. The faded wallpaper looked as it had before, the wardrobe and desk just as before, the looking glass covered with a sheet just as before.

The sounds faded, I blew out the candle; whereupon they resumed, only more quietly, but with a miserable persistence. Wild with terror, I burst into the hallway, to be met with the lady of the inn, bearing a candle. She was half-dressed. I knew not where to look, but she moved towards me, pushing me back into the room and closing the door. I could scarcely resist as she pushed me down

and took off her black dress. Her entire body was covered in scars, some pale and silvery, some red, some raised, some wide across her back like the trail of the sullen river outside. She leapt on me, she undressed me, and she put her mouth to mine - she devoured me. As we rocked together I thought her bites were playful, but then each nip became pain, each pain became agony, and she broke my skin, blood flowing. I screamed, trying to prise her from me, and yet she grew ever more violent, and in a final spasm of desperation, I took the candlestick and struck her at the side of her head. One blow, two, a third, and she lay still, bludgeoned, a deep trickle of scarlet tracing across the bedclothes.

I leapt up, in a frenzy, and ran outside, but they were waiting for me, the men, waiting in a line in their dark clothes, hanging by their necks. Their faces were bloody and bitten, and their eyes wide open, the terror of their last moments etched on their stricken faces. I knew not where to turn, I fell to my knees, I wept, and inside the bedroom the keening and scratching began again. As daylight crept into the room, I could see that behind the faded wallpaper, something was moving. At first I could not make out what it was, but slowly I recognised the outline of a man precisely my build; and as the keening reached a crescendo, I recognised it as my own voice.

I ran to the looking glass and tore the sheet from it. Choking, choking, I saw a solitary reflection stare back at me - the image of a pale young woman in a black dress.

© SF Stewart 2007

CATTLE

by Richard Cosgrove

Sam Maxwell raised his pint glass and tilted his head back, draining the last drops of Guinness. He licked his lips as he stood up and made his way to the bar for a refill.

'Same again, Sam?' asked Veronica, the slim, black-clad Goth girl who tended bar at Ben Crouch's Tavern.

'Yeah, thanks darling,' he replied, running his eyes up and down her body. She caught his eye and smiled.

'Out of your league, sunshine,' she said, and then gave him a wink.

They had been an item once, very briefly. For about ten minutes actually last New Years Eve. That was three months ago, though, and Veronica had moved on since, preferring the tall, long haired, leather clad boys that would begin to fill up the pub later to five foot five, blonde, slightly overweight journalists like Sam. He didn't care, though. Those ten minutes had been enough for him.

She put his pint on the bar and he handed her a fiver, telling her to keep the change.

'Cheers Sam,' she said, and moved on to serve the tall, long haired leather clad boy who had just walked into the pub.

Sam walked back to his booth where he had left his coat and laptop. When he had ventured to the bar the table had been empty except for a couple of beer mats and an overflowing ashtray. Now,

though, there was a white envelope. As he got nearer he could see that it had his name written on the front in an unsteady hand.

He looked quickly around the pub, trying to spot whoever might have left the envelope there. It couldn't have been the boy who had walked in because he'd come in the front entrance. He picked up the envelope and walked quickly back to the bar where Veronica was talking to the boy.

'Veronica,' he said.

She turned to look at him as he waved the envelope in the air.

'Did you see who put this on my table?' he asked.

'No, sorry darling,' she replied, shaking her head.

'OK, thanks.'

Veronica returned her attention to her latest prey and he returned to his booth.

Sam sat down, took a deep swig of his Guinness and put the glass down.

He turned the envelope over in his hands. It was sealed, and apart from his handwritten name on the front there was nothing else on it. He slid the index finger of his right hand under the flap and opened it. Inside was a single folded piece of white paper. He pulled it from the envelope and unfolded the letter.

There were three sentences, written in the same uncertain hand as his name on the front of the envelope.

I've got a hell of a story for you.
It'll cost you though.
Call this number at 10pm tonight.

Underneath them was a mobile phone number.

Sam sat staring at the piece of paper for a moment, wondering again who had placed the envelope on his table, and why if they'd gone to the trouble of finding his favourite drinking haunt they hadn't just approached him in the booth. He'd had many anonymous tip offs over the ten years that he'd been a freelance journalist, of course, but there was something about this one that felt different. He didn't have a clue why it should, but it did and over the

years he had learned to trust his gut feeling. It was rarely wrong.

He checked his watch. Seven eighteen. He debated returning to his flat in Camden to wait until ten but decided that he'd be better off staying central in case his mystery contact wanted to meet up in person. Ben Crouch's Tavern was mid-way between the Oxford Circus and Tottenham Court Road tube stations, which meant that he could get anywhere in central London fairly quickly from where he was. Worst case scenario he could get a cab but given the current state of his finances that was an option he'd rather avoid if at all possible.

Sam shook another Camel out of the packet and placed it between his lips. He picked up his lighter, flicked the wheel with his thumb and let the flame ignite the end, drawing the rich smoke deep into his lungs. He picked his pint up, and settled in to wait until ten o'clock.

***

James Fallon sat on a lowered toilet seat in one of the two cubicles in the basement toilet of Ben Crouch's Tavern. He knew that Maxwell would have read the letter by now and that gave him some comfort, but not much.

He was terrified of receiving the call, knowing full well what the consequences of contacting the journalist would be, but more scared of what would happen if Maxwell didn't agree to his terms for the story. This was his last chance to get himself out of the deep pit he'd managed to get himself into. If he didn't get hold of five thousand pounds by midnight on Friday, tomorrow, then he was a dead man.

He smiled grimly to himself at that thought. In many ways he already was a dead man, but if Friday came without him getting the money then it would make it a literal reality.

Not that anyone would miss him, though. He'd been living rough on the streets of London for the last four months, after his wife had kicked him out of their flat when she found out about his addiction. Four months of discovering what it meant to be invisi-

ble, effectively dead to the world.

He looked down at the mobile phone in his hand, the one that had been given to him three weeks ago by the man known as The Shepherd. He didn't have any credit on it and so couldn't make any outgoing calls, but until tonight there was only ever one person who called him on it, that person being The Shepherd. Every Tuesday and Saturday the phone would ring and the voice of The Shepherd would give him a location and a time. James then had to simply turn up at the rendezvous point, or suffer the consequences.

He couldn't do it any more, though. Last night he had decided that he would get out while he still could. Or hoped he could, anyway. Maxwell was his only hope, the only journalist that he knew would even entertain the tale that he had to tell. Any self-respecting person would listen to him and then suggest he check himself into the nearest mental hospital, but more fool them. James had seen things that even he himself would have scoffed at three weeks ago.

He looked at the time on the mobile's screen. Seven fifty. Why had he told Maxwell ten o'clock? The next couple of hours were going to be the longest of his life. They might also be the last.

***

Sam stepped through Ben Crouch's back door into the chilly night air. He quickly zipped up his jacket and began walking down the alley, away from the bustling tourist mecca that was Oxford Street after dark.

He looked at his watch. Nine fifty-two. He'd sat and nursed another couple of Guinnesses as he waited for the time to crawl by, but now he wanted to be somewhere quiet and isolated so that he could give his full attention to the call he was about to make.

He stopped at the end of the dark alley and pulled his phone from his pocket, his thumb unconsciously pressing the buttons that unlocked the keyboard as they had done a thousand times before. Most people entered and left Ben Crouch's through the front door opposite The Plaza shopping centre, so he was sure that he would

have a degree of privacy in the alley.

Sam unfolded the piece of paper and punched the numbers written on it into the phone. Despite the combined numbing effect of the four pints of Guinness inside him and the sharp March air that hadn't quite left winter behind he felt a little bit nervous.

'C'mon, snap out of it,' he muttered to himself, annoyed that he was feeling even the slightest bit apprehensive. In his decade as a journalist he had knowingly put himself in harm's way to secure a story on more than one occasion, but he had never felt quite so unsure when making contact with a source.

He glanced at his watch again. Nine fifty-seven.

'Close enough,' he said and hit send.

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James stood at the Oxford Street end of the alley, watching Maxwell shiver in the cold night air. He watched him punch the numbers into the phone and then jumped as his own phone vibrated in his hand. He'd switched off the ring tone so as not to draw any attention to himself.

He glanced down at the screen, which had illuminated with Maxwell's incoming number. He had no intention of actually answering it, but just needed the number. He let it vibrate for ten seconds while he memorised the number and then thumbed the end button, killing the connection. He had what he needed, not just the number but also the knowledge that Maxwell was interested in what he had to say.

Satisfied, and scared, James walked quickly up Oxford Street in the direction of the towering Centrepoint building. He deftly weaved his way through the intoxicated tourists and walked into the warmth of the Virgin store. He felt marginally safer inside and among the crowds of late night shoppers.

James took the escalator up to the first floor and pretended to browse the racks of DVDs as he thumbed a message into his phone. That done he typed in Maxwell's number from memory, for his memory was pretty good, almost photographic, and hit send. The

screen flashed up the message 'sending' for a couple of seconds before reporting 'message sent'.

He breathed deeply, feeling slightly giddy for a moment as he thought of the line he had just crossed, and closed his eyes. He stood breathing in and out for a few moments while his hammering heart began to slowly return to its regular rhythm and then opened them again. It was done, there was no going back now. He let out an audible sigh, drawing a glance from a couple standing on the other side of the rack, and then walked quickly towards the down escalator to keep his date with destiny.

***

'Bastard!'

Sam lowered the phone from his ear and look at the screen. 'Call ended' the display helpfully reported.

'Bastard, bastard, bastard,' he cursed into the night, his words accompanied by wisps of his frozen breath spiralling upwards as he ran his right hand through his hair.

So much for his hell of a story. All he'd got for his time was an empty wallet and the promise of a mild hangover in the morning. He jammed the phone back into his pocket and considered what to do next. He was reluctant to give up on him or her just yet. Maybe they'd been cut off, or hadn't heard it ring.

'Yeah, right,' he muttered to himself. More likely they'd bottled out at the last minute. It wouldn't be the first time a source had suddenly developed cold feet. He knew he should head home to his flat but decided against his better judgement to drown his disappointment in another pint. He pulled his wallet from his left trouser pocket, attached to his belt by a thin silver chain, and looked in the coin pocket. Four pounds and change, enough for another.

Sam gripped the handle of the Ben Crouch's back door and was about to go back inside when his phone made the vaguely unpleasant gurgling sound that accompanied the arrival of a text message. His heart accelerated momentarily as he quickly retrieved his phone and looked at the screen.

'New message,' it informed him and he quickly thumbed through the menu to read it.

Soho Square. The Gardener's hut. Ten twenty. Don't be late.

Sam looked at his watch. Ten thirteen. He broke into a sprint, heading up the alley towards Oxford Street. Soho Square was a two minute walk away, but he calculated that he'd be there in half that time, even accounting for weaving through the crowds of tourists. As he emerged into the bright lights of Oxford Street he could feel the adrenaline coursing through his veins, that old familiar feeling of the hunt, the chase that more often than not resulted in a story.

He darted in front of a red London bus, earning a blast of its horn from the Asian driver, and ran down the south side of Oxford Street towards Soho Street. He raced around the corner and sprinted the short distance to Soho Square itself.

During the summer months the square was host to a series of open air concerts, but in early March it was reasonably empty, populated only by a couple of drunks and the odd couple who couldn't wait to get home to get to know each other a little better. Sam raced through the entrance in the railings and saw a figure standing by the Gardener's hut, nervously looking in his direction.

Sam stopped and their eyes met. The man was dressed in grey combat trousers and a dark blue jumper, clutching a mobile in his left hand and looking at him with frightened eyes. Sam began to walk towards him, his hands outstretched slightly to signify that he wasn't a threat. The man seemed to relax for a moment, and then his eyes widened, focusing on something behind Sam.

He turned around quickly to follow the man's gaze but saw nothing. Sam turned back towards the Gardener's hut just in time to see the man take off at speed towards Tottenham Court Road.

'Wait!' he yelled, running after the man as he headed down Sutton Row towards the back of the Astoria. The man didn't turn around but instead veered suddenly down the dark alley that was Falconberg Mews.

Sam raced to the corner of the alley, panting heavily due to his

usual aversion to exercise, his lungs seemingly on fire. He could feel the uncomfortable clammy layer of sweat that had formed underneath his t-shirt.

He rounded the corner and stopped. The man was laying on his front in the middle of the alley, his head twisted around at an unnatural angle, his obviously dead eyes staring right at Sam.

Sam stood there, inhaling and exhaling slowly deeply to try and bring his breathing back and under control, his body trembling ever so slightly as he did so. He stared at the man, a white male, early thirties he guessed, his final expression a look of sheer terror frozen onto his face.

'Shit.'

He looked quickly around, trying to see if the man's killer was nearby but saw nobody. The alley was empty, save for himself and the man. He looked back at the body. It wasn't the first body he'd ever seen, but he'd never seen such a terrified expression on a corpse before. Breathing more slowly now, he walked up to it.

Sam stood looking down at the body for a full thirty seconds, his mind racing, trying to decide what to do. He knew he should call the police, but wasn't sure whether to do so anonymously or not. If he gave his name then he would face all kinds of questions, and might even be a suspect, but on the other hand he might find out who the man was, and be given a clue as to why he had wanted to talk to him, what his 'hell of a story' was, or had been, anyway.

He retrieved his phone from his trouser pocket and thumbed in 999. As he was about to hit send he noticed a sliver of white card sticking out from the man's clenched fist.

Sam looked quickly around again. There was still nobody to be seen. He cancelled the call and crouched beside the body. Gripping the corner of the card between his finger and thumb, he eased it out of the dead man's grasp and stood up, holding it up to read it by the light of a nearby street lamp.

Do you need money? In debt?
We can help.

You have what we need
and we pay well!

Call us.

The card was basic, obviously produced by one of the machines that were located in railway stations and the like, and there was a mobile phone number underneath the basic black type, which Sam recognised as Times New Roman.

He turned the card over. His name, *Sam Maxwell*, was written on the back in the same hand as that on the note he had received earlier that evening. Who was this man who had his name written on the back of this card? And more importantly what had he intended to tell Sam?

He looked down at the body again. The man's eyes were beginning to harden as the liquid in them started to freeze. Sam wanted to reach down and close them, hating the way that they seemed to look straight into him, but stopped himself. That would only leave his fingerprints on the body, and invite all kinds of unwanted questions and suspicions.

Sam stood in the cold wrestling with his conscience for a minute before deciding on a plan of action. He thumbed 999 on the keypad of his phone again and held it up to his ear, listening to the electronic purr as it rang.

'999, which service do you require?'

'Police,' Sam said, attempting to disguise his voice.

'One moment please,' she replied.

Sam began walking away from the body, heading down Sutton Row along the side of the Astoria towards Tottenham Court Road.

'Hello. Police control room. Can I help you?' a male voice asked.

'There's been a murder,' Sam said, 'behind the Astoria, near Soho Square.'

'OK, can you confirm your name for me please, Sir?'

Sam ended the call and pushed the phone back into his pocket, picking up his pace as he turned left onto Tottenham Court

Road. There were the usual assortment of tourists and drunks milling about near the corner of Oxford Street, but he deftly weaved through them and descended into the tube station. He pressed his Oyster card onto the electronic reader on top of the barrier and it opened with a jerk, allowing him through.

He looked again at the white card that he'd been clutching in his left hand, and then fished out his wallet, and slipped it between two of his credit cards for safe keeping. He might not have got the story from the horse's mouth so to speak, but at least he still had a lead, and intended to follow up on it in the morning. Right now, though, all Sam wanted to do was ride the Northern line to Camden and down a couple of large whiskies in his local pub.

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Ninety minutes later Sam turned the key in his front door and let himself into his flat. He rented a one-bedroomed first floor place on Camden High Street, halfway between Camden Town and Mornington Crescent tube stations. It wasn't much, but it suited his budget, which was just as well given the intermittent nature of his freelance journalist's paychecks and the exorbitant rents that landlords seemed to charge these days.

The flat was sparsely furnished. In the living room he had an old sofa covered with a patchwork throw, a PC that had seen better days on a small table and matching chair from IKEA, and a television/DVD combo sitting on an IKEA stand. A small bookcase stood against the wall, crammed full of well read Stephen King, Harlan Ellison and James Patterson novels, and a framed poster for Escape From New York, Sam's favourite movie, provided the only wall decoration.

The two large Glenfiddich's he'd downed in the World's End had taken the edge off his nerves, but he still felt on edge. He wandered into the tiny kitchen and picked up a can of Stella from the small kitchen table before returning to the living room and sinking onto the sofa. He popped the can open and drank deeply.

Sam placed the half empty can on the floor and shook a Camel

from its packet. He lit the end and sucked on the cigarette as he opened up his wallet to retrieve the card. He turned it over and over in his hand, reading and rereading both sides. What did it mean? And why was his name written on the back?

He picked up the can and drained it, trying to gather some Dutch courage to actually call the number and find out who was on the other end. He retrieved his phone and placed it on the sofa beside him, breathing deeply, excited at the prospect of a story, but terrified at the thought that whoever answered the number might well be responsible for the murder he had witnessed earlier.

'Come on, Sam' he muttered to himself. 'Are you a journalist or a mouse?'

He turned the card over again and read the simple black print.

Do you need money? In debt?
We can help.
You have what we need
and we pay well!

Call us.

He drew in a lungful of smoke and held it, savouring the taste in this mouth. If he didn't call now then he might lose his chance at whatever story might be attached, particularly if the killer *wasn't* at the end of the line and whoever was read about the murder in tomorrow's paper. This was his one and only shot at this lead.

He exhaled slowly, the smoke drifting lazily upwards from his mouth towards the nicotine stained ceiling, and picked up the phone. He quickly entered the numbers and then paused, his thumb hovering over the send button. His heart increased its tempo slightly, in synch with his breathing.

'Fuck,' he spat out and hit the cancel button, flinging the phone down on the sofa.

He was scared, and pissed off at himself for being so scared. This wasn't like him. He was usually fearless when he had a story in his grasp, but then again his tips weren't usually prised from the

deathly grip of a corpse's hands.

He leaned back on the sofa and stared at the ceiling, listening to the late night revellers passing by his window below. He smoked the remainder of his Camel and then leaned forward, stubbing it out in the ashtray on the floor.

'First thing,' he said out loud, 'definitely first thing in the morning.'

Sam put the white card down on the sofa next to the phone and stood up, suddenly feeling very tired. He yawned, the muscles in his mouth straining as his mouth opened wide. He walked the eight feet from the living room to the bedroom, stripping off his clothes on the way and crawled into his double bed.

He glanced at the red numbers on his alarm clock. Twelve twenty-three. He would dial the number first thing in the morning when he was sober. He lay his head down on the cool pillow and closed his eyes. Moments later he was fast asleep.

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Sam opened his eyes. He raised his hand to block the sunlight falling across them from the window whose curtains he had forgotten to draw the previous night. His mouth tasted of burnt whisky and stale cigarettes, so no change there.

He rolled onto his front, burying his face in the pillow and immediately began to think about the card on his sofa. He knew if he didn't haul himself out of bed and call the number then he might lose this lead, if it wasn't already too late.

Sam looked at his alarm clock. Seven nineteen. He stretched his arms out, holding his breath for a moment and then pushed himself into a kneeling position and climbed off the bed. He pulled on last night's discarded clothes and shuffled into the tiny kitchen, feeling like an extra in Dawn of the Dead.

He filled the silver IKEA kettle with cold water and switched it on. As the element hissed into life he fished a tea bag from the open box of Yorkshire Tea on the side and dropped in into the mug that he hadn't washed from the day before. He opened the fridge,

poured just a splash of milk from the plastic container and replaced it, closing the door firmly. That done he walked into the living room and looked at the sofa where his phone and the card still lay from the previous night. The card was face down, displaying his hand-written name to him.

'Who are you?' Sam thought and then corrected himself, 'who were you?'

The kettle clicked off in the kitchen, the water audibly bubbling. Sam returned once more to the kitchen and poured the water into the cup, stirring the teabag with a spoon as he did so, a habit he hacked picked up from his mother years ago so as to brew a good strong cuppa.

Carrying the steaming hot brew into the living room he picked up the card and turned it over, reading the black typed words once again.

Do you need money? In debt?
We can help.
You have what we need
and we pay well!

Call us.

'Okay Sam,' he muttered, 'now or never.' He put the card down on top of the TV and retrieved his phone from the sofa. Reading the numbers from the card he moved his thumb across the keypad and then before he had time to back out pressed the send button.

He held the phone up to his ear and listened to the electronic purr as he imagined who might pick up at the other end. He felt his heart rate increase slightly as he waited for an answer. The part of his brain that had seen too many *film noir* movies anticipated a deep, gravelly voice, perhaps with a slight lisp, so he was surprised when after a couple of rings a young female voice spoke to him.

'Hello,' the voice said, 'and thank you for calling. You have what we need, and we have what you need.'

Sam had expected a live person to answer, but his keen ear picked up a faint hiss in the background and he realised that the girl's voice was a recording.

'The fact you are listening to this message means that you are comfortable with the terms that have been explained to you, and we very much look forward to a mutually satisfying relationship. To proceed to the next stage of our transaction, a representative will meet you at Johnson's Cat on Friday evening at 10pm sharp. Do not be late. We look forward to making your acquaintance.'

A faint click on the line signified that the message had ended. Two thoughts sprang instantly to Sam's mind. The first that it was Friday today, which gave him about twelve hours to address the second, where and what was Johnson's Cat?

He rubbed his hand over the stubble that had grown on his chin and downed the rest of his tea. He put the mug down on the kitchen counter and then switched on the PC in the living room.

'Google is hopefully my friend,' Sam muttered as the machine booted up, eventually displaying his Google homepage after several minutes. He typed in 'Johnson's Cat' and hit the search button. There were Six hundred and forty-four thousand matches, most of which seemed to be for flea powder or flea repellent shampoo.

'Okay,' Sam sighed, and then added the word 'London' to the search parameters. This time he hit the 'I'm feeling lucky' button, and a site popped up with an article about a bronze statue of a cat that had been erected outside of Samuel Johnson's house in Gough Square. Johnson had written the *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1775 and had apparently been besotted by his cat, a tabby called Hodge, even going so far as to feed him oysters that Johnson himself fetched from the local market.

This has got to be it, Sam thought to himself as he checked Google for other instances of Johnson's Cat, finding dozens of references to the bronze, and yet more flea paraphernalia. It seemed an odd place to meet, but then again, it was in an enclosed square just off Fleet Street according to the article, and so would shield any business from unwanted eyes.

Fleet Street was no more than three quarters of an hour from

Sam's flat, even in rush hour, which gave him some time to see what he could find out about the murder he had witnessed the previous night. He retrieved his jacket from the back of the chair and pocketed a small dictaphone that was perched on the edge of one of the bookshelves. It was one of the old fashioned type with the small cassette tapes, but Sam swore by it when chasing a story. He'd lost too much digital data, mostly through his own ineptitude, and felt more comfortable doing things the old way.

He locked the door of his flat and headed down the stairs in the direction of the local newsagents. Camden High Street was coming alive at this time of the morning. City types in suits hurried for buses and tube trains, more casually dressed people headed in the direction of Camden Market where arriving for work in a suit would attract puzzled looks given the alternative nature of its wares.

'Morning Sam,' Hasnain called from behind the counter at the far end of Shariff's Newsagent as Sam stepped into the shop.

'Hi Has,' he called back, stooping to pick up a copy of the Daily Mail. He'd been coming in this shop nearly every day for the last couple of years and enjoyed shooting the breeze with the Tanzanian.

'Nasty murder last night,' Has said, and Sam stood bolt upright, his head snapping around to look at the shopkeeper, a worried look on his face. Was it all over the papers?

Has saw Sam's expression and frowned. 'What's up?' he asked, genuine concern on his face, 'you look like you've seen a ghost.'

'What murder, Has?' Sam asked, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

'Front of the Mail,' Has said and Sam immediately looked down at the paper in his hand.

There was a large picture of Burnt Oak tube station on the front, blue and white police tape strung across the entrance to preserve the scene of the crime and prevent journalists like Sam from seeing anything they shouldn't be poking their noses into.

A middle-aged man had been stabbed to death with a hunting

knife, and the killer apprehended almost immediately by a police van that happened to be passing a few moments later. Thankfully there had been no passing police vans in Soho Square last night.

'Ah…yeah,' Sam said, feeling a little guilty at being relieved that it was someone else that had been murdered. 'Nasty.'

He gave Has the money for the Mail and left the shop, breathing easier once more.

Five minutes later Sam was sitting in the A1 Café, a couple of doors up from Has's newsagents, a mug of hot black hot coffee sitting idle as he flicked through the papers for any sign of the dead man from last night.

He didn't find anything in the Daily Mail, apart from the usual tirade against the government and the calls to ban this, that and the other, but on page seven of the Metro that the previous occupant of his table had left behind he found what he was looking for.

Soho Square Killing

An unidentified man was found murdered just off Soho Square by police late last night. The white man, said to be in his twenties, had had his neck broken, police said, appealing to anyone who might have been in the area and seen anything suspicious to contact them.

The byline was credited to Liz Baxter, a journalist that Sam knew well. Very well, actually. They had shared digs a few years ago when they were both learning their trade, living on baked beans and pasta and drinking two litre bottles of cheap cider in a small, damp flat in Kilburn, just north of where Sam lived now.

They still often helped each other out on stories and with contacts, so Sam pulled out his phone and thumbed through the address book until he found her number. He hit send and held it up to his ear, the electronic purr of the ringing strangely soothing. It rang twice before a familiar voice spoke to him.

'Sammy!' Liz almost yelled down the phone, 'how the devil are you?'

Sam smiled. Liz was one of those people in life who were interminably happy. Nothing short of confirmation of the end of the world could put a dent in her smile and she always managed to find the good in the worst of situations. He still cringed when she called him 'Sammy', though. The only other person that called him that was his mother, a fact Liz knew well.

'I'm pretty good, Lizzie,' he answered, mostly truthfully. 'Need your help on a story, though.'

'Oh, yes?' she asked.

'Yeah,' Sam replied, 'it might have something to do with your article on page seven this morning, actually.'

'That was weird,' Liz said, and he could imagine the furrow that would have appeared on her brow as she spoke the words.

'How so?' he asked.

'Well, the guy clearly died from having his head twisted half way around, and it initially looked like an open and shut assault gone bad.'

'But….' Sam said, leading her on.

'But I got a call from my friend at the coroner's office, you know, Jimmy Stanger?'

'Yeah, I know him,' Sam confirmed.

'Well, he said they found a small puncture wound on his neck that had become infected. Like he'd been injecting himself with something, but I've never heard of junkies mainlining into the jugular before, have you?'

'No. That's a new one on me,' Sam said.

'The funny thing was, though,' she continued, 'there were no tracks on his arms or legs. You know, the usual places that junkies tend to stick junk into themselves.'

Sam felt his own brow furrowing. That was strange. He'd heard of addicts injecting themselves in their arms or thighs, and even between their toes if they ran out of available veins or wanted to disguise their habits, but never in the neck.

'Did your guy have a name, Lizzie?' he asked.

'No. He wasn't carrying any ID,' she answered. 'The police think he might have been living rough though. The officer who

found him thought he recognised him from the shelter on Dean Street.'

'Any leads?' Sam ventured.

'Not really,' she replied, 'although the officer did tell me that they got a call informing them of the murder, but the guy who rang it in obviously didn't want to stick around.'

'Oh?' Sam said, trying not to sound as desperate to know more as he really was.

'No, he was gone when they got there. They want to speak to him, obviously, but if you want my opinion it seems unlikely that he'd have killed the guy and then phoned it in.'

'No, that wouldn't make sense,' Sam confirmed, suddenly wanting to light up a cigarette.

'Anyway, what does this have to do with you, Sammy?' she asked.

'Oh, errr,' Sam's mind raced to find an excuse to terminate the conversation, which had suddenly veered into awkward territory. 'I was in the area last night, and just wondered what had happened.

'Did you see anything, Sam?' Liz asked, her voice taking on the professional tone of the investigative reporter. The shortening of his name was enough to tell Sam that she had caught the scent of a story like a shark zeroing in on a drop of blood in water.

'Hang on, I've got a call on the other line,' he lied, 'I'll call you back in a minute.'

He killed the conversation and put the phone down on the table, picking up the coffee instead and taking a long swallow. It was still hot and burned the back of his throat, but his mind was more interested in what Liz had said about the puncture wound on the man's neck.

He fished a new packet of Camels out of his coat pocket and unwrapped them, shaking one into his hand. He lit it and drew deeply on the rich smoke that tumbled into his lungs.

His instinct was gnawing at him, telling him that somehow this single puncture wound in the man's neck and the fact that he had contacted Sam with a story were not coincidental. He just couldn't think for the life of him how the two were connected.

He smoked the remainder of his Camel and finished his coffee. Leaving enough coins on the plastic tablecloth to cover the drink and leave a small tip for the owner, Sam got up and headed back out onto Camden High Street.

He looked at his watch. Eight fifty-three. He stared at the dial, willing time to accelerate so that he could get to this rendezvous at Johnson's Cat and find out what this was all about. When he really needed it, Sam could draw on vast reserves of patience, but when he had a story in his sights, and particularly an exclusive which this had all the makings of, he wanted to be on it immediately.

Sam returned to his flat and fired up his PC. Whenever he had to kill time there was one sure-fire distraction that would help the hours to fly by. He moved the mouse pointer over the World of Warcraft icon on his desktop and double clicked, entering another world for a few hours.

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'Guinness please,' Sam said, leaning on the bar in Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, a pub he knew on Fleet Street. As the blonde Australian surfer behind the bar poured the black drink he checked his watch. Nine thirty-two. He was on his second pint, but figured that he needed a drop or two of Dutch, or to be more accurate Irish, courage before leaping into the unknown.

For the last hour his stomach had begun to succumb to the uncomfortable feeling of a thousand butterflies trying to escape from it. Sam didn't usually get nervous before meeting sources, but as he had felt last night, something about this unsettled him slightly and he didn't know why.

He paid the surfer barman and retired to a small booth in the old pub. There were several groups of lawyers and solicitors gathered in the pub, enjoying a drink or two after a hard day at the office. Sam ignored their raucous laughter and incessant chatter and instead smoked several Camels as he nursed his pint, checking his watch every other minute.

As he drank he cast his eyes over the décor. Ye Olde Cheshire

Cheese was one of the very few pubs in London that could rightfully justify having 'Ye Olde' in its name. There had been a hostelry on this site since the thirteenth century, the first incarnation being a guesthouse attached to a Carmelite Monastery, whose vaulted cellars could still be seen in the basement bar of the establishment.

Sam liked it in here. There was a real sense of history, something that was sadly lacking in the many cloned brewery chains that had infected the tourist traps of the city over the last couple of decades. He felt like he belonged to the city when he was in a place like this.

Eventually the display on his watch read nine fifty and he drained the last of the dark, bitter liquid. He lit another cigarette for the road and headed for the door, placing his empty glass on the bar as he went.

'Cheers, mate,' called the barman to his back as he stepped into the chilly night air.

Johnson's Cat was only a thirty second walk from the pub but Sam managed to make the journey last twice that time. He walked through the narrow alleys that led to the clearing in which the bronze statue of the cat stood, sucking on the rich Camel as he went.

Sam stepped into Gough Square, Hodge's eternal home, and stopped dead, a puzzled look furrowing his brow.

He had expected to be alone, or to find one other person there waiting for him, but to his surprise there were half a dozen people standing near the statue, all with their hands in their pockets and their heads bowed, staring at the ground.

By the looks of them they were members of London's homeless community. Their clothes had seen better days and the men, who accounted for all but one of the crowd, either had full unkempt beards, or several days of stubble. The solitary woman looked up at him, her eyes hollow and empty and then returned her gaze to the concrete slabs beneath her feet.

Sam was suddenly glad that he hadn't shaved that morning, and that he had on last night's clothes. Well, the last three nights,

actually. He didn't feel as conspicuous as he might have done had he turned up scrubbed and in his best suit.

He started to say something but caught it in his throat before he uttered a sound. Clearly these people were waiting for something, or someone, and there was a good chance that they were all here for the same thing, whatever that might be.

Sam tried to appear to look at the ground too, but snuck surreptitious glances at his companions. They all had blank looks on their faces, almost as though they were in some kind of delayed shock, so Sam tried to emulate this look without it seeming too forced.

He gently twisted his left arm so that the sleeve of his jacket fell away from his hand, revealing the face of his watch. Nine fifty-nine. Almost show time.

Sam exhaled, the night air having become chilly enough to turn his warm breath into a fine cloud of vapour as it left his lips. In the distance the first chime of ten o'clock carried on the still air from St Dunstan's church on Fleet Street, where Sam could picture the two figures striking the bell on the elaborate diorama situated on the outside of the church. He remembered reading somewhere that they represented the giants Gog and Magog.

'Good evening.'

Sam almost jumped out of his skin as the voice spoke right next to his left ear. He turned and looked at its source. Standing beside him was a well-dressed man in, Sam guessed, his late forties. The man's skin was almost translucent and Sam thought he could actually see the blue veins beneath it, but despite this the one thought that ricocheted around his head was that the man looked, well, beautiful.

He had fine blonde hair, slightly longer than shoulder length, and his eyes were deep pools of blue, inviting Sam to gaze into them. As he did so, Sam found he was unable to speak, even though he wanted to. The rest of the people in the square remained motionless, barely acknowledging the fact that this man had appeared almost literally out of thin air.

'This won't hurt a bit,' said the man, as Sam felt a prick in the

back of his neck, the pain from which lasted for all of two seconds before everything went black.

***

Sam awoke in his flat with a start. He was on his bed, fully clothed, and he felt a little light headed, like he had after the solitary time that Lizzie had dragged him along to give blood a couple of years previously.

He had dreamed of being strapped face down to a table in a large building not unlike a cattle shed. He had dreamed of vast containers of red liquid and of tubes and needles and of men standing near him talking of an escaped donor.

There was a dull ache at the base of his skull and his face was coated in a thin film of sweat. He touched the back of his neck with his left hand and brought it around so that he could see. There was a small crust of dried blood on his index finger, along with a fresher smear where he had obviously reopened a small wound.

'Ouch,' he said, more out of reflex than of actual pain.

Sam instinctively put his hand in the pocket of his trousers to retrieve his Camels and found instead a plastic envelope not unlike those used to bag up coins for banks. He opened it up and tipped it onto the bed. There was five hundred pounds in twenty-pound notes, a small black mobile phone, and another white card. On the front of the card were three sentences in the same type as the card he had removed from the dead man's hand:

Thank you for your deposit.
Please find your payment enclosed.
You will be notified by phone when your next appointment is

Sam stood up, a fine mist of static momentarily clouding his eyes and walked over to the table where his Camels were, next to the dead man's card. He unwrapped the new packet and shook a cigarette out, placing it between his lips. He picked up the lighter and thumbed the wheel, the flame igniting the end of the Camel.

He sucked deep on the cigarette, the deep rich taste never tasting so sweet, so good.

'What the fuck happened?' he asked himself, touching the back of his neck again.

'An intelligent question, Mr Maxwell.'

Sam physically jumped, his feet leaving the floor for a moment as he turned around to see a man standing in his bedroom. The same man from Gough Square, his piercing blue eyes once again fixed on Sam's.

Sam looked quickly around, trying to figure out how the man had got into his flat. He was sure he hadn't been here a moment ago.

'How the fuck….' He began before the man interrupted.

'Oh, it's easy, Mr Maxwell. One of the benefits of being what you humans like to call *the undead*.' The man smiled, revealing dazzlingly white teeth, two of which appeared to be slightly more pointed than the others.

Sam frowned. 'You're a….'

'Vampire, Mr Maxwell,' the man said. 'Yes, I am indeed a vampire. And you are an investigative journalist.'

Sam found himself nodding slowly, almost subconsciously, unable to take his eyes away from the deep blue pools set either side of the man's nose.

'I'm afraid you've seen too much, Mr Maxwell. Too much by far. We were sloppy in letting Mr Fallon get away, I'm afraid, and I was sloppy in not tracking him down before he tried to tell you all about us. However, I'm here to rectify that unfortunate situation.'

Sam tried to speak, but it was the vocal equivalent of swimming in tar. A few low, guttural grunts escaped his lips but he couldn't form the words he wanted to ask the man. At that moment the cigarette that he had forgotten he was holding burned down to the butt and singed his hand.

'Oh, fuck!' Sam exclaimed, the spell momentarily broken as he dropped the cigarette and shook his hand as if it were on fire.

Seizing the moment, he looked back at the handsome blonde haired man and quickly forced out his question as he felt the vam-

pire's grip tighten over his will once again.

'What did you do to me?' he gasped.

The man smiled, revealing his teeth once again.

'Well, I suppose I can grant you that one last request,' he said, his eyes burning deep into Sam's skull.

Sam's body remained motionless, the muscles frozen, but his eyes widened in terror at the man's words. Final request sounded, well, pretty final to him.

'Contrary to popular belief,' the man said, 'we don't swoop down out of the night sky and sink our teeth into just any passing neck. For centuries now we've been operating a mutually beneficial scheme here in London. We do, of course, need to feed, and while we can survive on the blood of animals, there's nothing quite like the rich taste of fresh human blood. But we never take more than we need, and we believe in the old maxim of *quid pro quo*'.

'We select our feeders, I don't like to call them victims because really they're not, from the ranks of the homeless, offering something they need, money, in exchange for something that we need, their blood. It's all very civilised really these days. We don't even bite them any more.'

Sam's eyes suddenly widened and he forced out two more words. 'The machines.'

The man smiled. 'Yes, the machines. They work on the same principle as the milking machines that your farmers use on their cattle, which is effectively what you are to us really. Cattle, nothing more.'

Sam swallowed, recalling his dreams of tubes and needles and vast containers of what he now realised was blood. Human blood. Despite his revulsion, there was a part of him that had to admire the ingenuity of the whole set up.

'Usually,' the man continued, 'our cattle are content to take the money to feed their addictions, be it drink or drugs, and are happy to remain silent about our mutually beneficial arrangement. Of course we filter their blood to remove any such impurities, so it doesn't matter to us what their poison is, so to speak.'

'Unfortunately, though, every now and again we get an

escapee from the program, the latest being Mr Fallon who unfortunately for you brought you onto our radar.'

The man smiled, and Sam thought there was the slightest trace of regret in his eyes.

'We can't have loose cannons running around threatening to expose us, now can we, Mr Maxwell?'

Sam found himself shaking his head very slowly, tears beginning to well in the corners of his eyes as he extrapolated the current situation to its logical conclusion.

'While I'm sure you're not a loose cannon, Mr Maxwell, you understand that you *are* a loose thread, and I'm going to have to tie this thread up. I'm sorry. It's nothing personal, I actually like your writing.' He smiled. 'We do read newspapers, you know.'

The man stepped closer to Sam and brought his pale white hands up to cup his face, the blue veins visible underneath the porcelain skin. He gripped Sam's jaw and twisted his hands quickly, a sharp crack ringing out in the small flat.

Sam's world went black. His body dropped to floor and the man melted from the room, as if he'd never been there at all.

***

'Sam?'

Liz Baxter hammered on the door of Sam Maxwell's flat, each blow harder than the last. She'd been trying to reach him on his mobile for the last twelve hours and had visited his usual haunts before finding herself outside his front door.

After a minute of trying to raise him, she opened her handbag and plucked out a small device that looked a little bit like a gun, but with a very short barrel. It was a police issue lock pick, highly illegal of course, but then as a journalist you never knew when you would have to be on the other side of a locked door to get your story.

Liz inserted the two metal prongs into Sam's lock and after a few moments of wrestling with the mechanism she was inside. The place was much as she remembered it from the last time she was

there. Unusually tidy for a man, she thought, as she stepped into the living room and looked into the bedroom.

'Sam!' she yelled, running the six feet to where his body lay, his head grotesquely twisted around so that it appeared to have been attached backwards. She quickly looked around the room, in case Sam's killer was still here but they were alone.

'Oh my God, Sam,' she whispered, her left hand covering her mouth, tears welling in her eyes. 'Oh my God, who did this? Who did this?'

Liz breathed in deeply and tried to gather her thoughts. She had come over here to ask Sam some more about his interest in her story, and wondered whether she had just stumbled onto something bigger than she had initially thought it was.

She looked around the flat again, and her eyes rested on a small white card that lay on his table in the living room. It had Sam's name written on it. She walked over to it and picked it up, turning it over as she did so. She read the words in black type:

Do you need money? In debt?
We can help.
You have what we need
and we pay well!

Call us.

Beneath them was a mobile phone number. Liz stared at it for a few moments, and then fished her mobile phone out of her coat pocket. She thumbed 999 into the keypad and raised the phone to her ear, listening to the electronic purring as she waited for the police to answer.

Liz slipped the card into her pocket, making a decision to call the number later. She smelled the blood in the water with this one, and her gut feel was that this could turn out to be one hell of a story.

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THE DARKLANDS HALL LEGACY

by Franklin Marsh

Timothy Uptyte and William Malodorous lived together. They had been pals since school. Bill protected Tim from the rougher element, and Tim helped with (or rather actually did) Bill's homework. They differed in many ways. Tim was spruce, clean, monied, normally wore a blazer and brylcreem in his hair, enjoyed wine, classical music, rugby and travelling the world.

Bill was dirty, filthy, unshaven, perpetually skint, normally clad in grubby t-shirt and jeans, swilled lager like there was no tomorrow, played rock 'n' roll in all its forms as loud as possible, enjoyed football and fish 'n' chips and blue comedians at the end of the pier.

Tim had needed another flatmate to convince his parents that he really meant to leave home, and Bill had been available. They led a mostly peaceful existence, Tim flying high in his father's City Stockbrokers office, Bill happily slacking at the local council rubbish tip.

Tim occasionally was pushed to the limit by Bill's lateness with the peppercorn rent, and piles of washing up, dirty laundry, 'glamour' magazines, plus empty cans of lager. Tim's fussiness, prissiness and insistence on having everything 'just so' would get up Bill's funnel every so often – but it was basically a happy arrangement.

Their downfall was girls. The young ladies in each young man's social circle held no interest at all – but the other's female compadres rang all sorts of bells. A recipe for disaster? Certainly. Tim's first date with Sharon had him screaming at Bill to tidy up the flat. It was completely unnecessary , as Sharon, bored to buggery by Tim's would-be upper class posturing in The Ivy had stormed out in a huff. A chastened Tim returned alone to an empty, pristine flat. Bill had spent the early evening cleaning up big time – and had even nicked Tim's emergency fund so that he could get merrily plastered at the Dog & Bone – leaving the flat free for Tim to have his wicked, wild way.

Similarly, Tim (against his better judgement) had lent Bill the brand new Mini Cooper to impress Jocasta with. Bill actually looked human as he escorted Tim's sister's friend to the 'chariot'. The good impression faded when the young lady realised Bill really was serious when he pulled up beside the kebab van.

The two lads just couldn't understand women.

Things worsened when Tim's dad told him to buck his ideas up – or he would be out on his ear. Bill's boss was equally unhelpful – 'Look, Malawotsit, you turn up late, pissed, or phone in sick one more time – you're fired.'

The two gazed across the breakfast table at each other. Tim, buttering his crumpet, Bill, pouring lager on his cornflakes.

'What can we do, William? Pater means it this time.'

'Don't you worry, Timbo. Something will turn up.'

They heard the letters drop through the door. Bill ambled over, scratching. He picked them up and returned to the table.

'All junk mail. Apart from an official looking one for you.'

Tim glanced anxiously at the envelope. 'It's post marked Lyttle Pyddle. My great aunt Isadora lives there.' He tore it open. 'Oh my God, it's from Arkwright & Hambone, solicitors!'

'Could be good news, Timbo.'

Tim read silently. A large grin spread across his face. A small chuckle escaped his lips. Then his eyes widened, the grin disappeared, he visibly paled. The letter floated to the floor.

Bill frowned and picked it up. The legal jargonese and long

words were mostly lost on him, but he got the gist.

He looked at his flatmate in puzzlement. 'Are you alright, Tim?'

Tim, pale and drawn, looked back at him in despair. 'Did you read it, William?'

'Yeah.'

' It's not what you think.'

'Sounds good to me.'

'You don't know that house.'

A long silence followed. Bil fumbled for a cigarette, lit up and examined Tim's worried face.

'Come on, Tim. The way I read it, your great aunt's croaked and left you half a mill. All you've got to do is spend a night in 'that' house and the money's ours….er…yours.'

Tim looked at Bill. He picked up the letter and read it again. He stood up and paced the room. Bill stubbed out the fag in his cereal bowl. 'Come on, Timbo. Spit it out.'

Tim stopped pacing and turned to his friend.

'I visited great aunt Isadora once, with my family. I was eight. We were supposed to stay for a week, but we left in the middle of the first night. Mum had the screaming heebie-jeebies. Sis was terrified. Even Dad didn't want to stay.'

'Your great aunt that bad, was she?'

'She was bad, Bill. Her badness filled that house. I heard later that she was rumoured to be a witch.'

'It's all cobblers, Timbo.'

'People say Darklands Hall is the ultimate haunted house.'

'Darklands Hall?' Bill paled underneath the dirt.

'Even you've heard of it, William?'

'Erm..Yeah. Wasn't it the Most Haunted they couldn't show?'

'I wish you wouldn't watch that tosh…..Yes, it was.'

'We've got to do it, Tim!' Bill seemed enthusiastic, if a little nervous.

'I can't!'

'You can! I'll be with you. You know I'll always be there for you if it's a matter of money.'

Timothy Uptyte actually burst into tears. 'I really can't stay there, Bill. You've no idea about that place. I've never, ever been so scared.'

'What happened?' enquired Bill.

'I can't say. I can't remember. Noises. Things. It was cold. Mum and Dad were terrified. That's what terrified me. My…my great aunt….she…she was scary. A scary woman. She looked like a witch. And that house. It creaked. It groaned. It ….changed. You could walk into a room, walk out, walk back in and it would be…different. There were….animals in there. And things. I can't go there. I can't!'

'Calm down,' said Bill, gently. 'Come on, Tim. You'll be fine. All that was a long time ago. You were a kid. I'll go with you. I can't see anything in the letter that says you have to be alone. It'll sort out our problems. Come on.'

Tim carried on sobbing.

***

Two days later, the little Mini Cooper sped through the Suffolk countryside, Bill at the wheel, Tim map-reading. They had an appointment with Ezekiel Arkwright at Darklands Hall at 7 pm. The sun shone brightly. Birds sang. All seemed right with the world. The rain began at 7.40, as they entered the village of Lyttle Pyddle. It really fell down. Visibility was greatly reduced. Soon the road was little more than a cart track. Timothy's confidence was fast disappearing. A crow cawed harshly as an imposing bulk of a house became discernible through the pouring rain. A rumble of thunder seemed to announce their presence. Bill pulled up beside a black limousine parked in front of the short flight of steps leading up to a massive front door.

'Ready?'

'As I'll ever be,' muttered Tim.

By the time they'd retrieved their bags from the back seat and run for the door, they were soaked. The pair squelched into the hall of the mansion. It was cold and empty.

'Anyone home?' called Bill jocularly.

'Ssshhhh,' whispered Tim.

'We're meeting someone, remember?' replied Bill. He turned and jumped at the tall, angular man in black who had materialised outside a door further down the hallway

'This way…..gentlemen,' advised the man, in a sepulchral tone, indicating the door.

'Mr Arkwright?' enquired Timothy, trying to keep his voice steady. He was shaking – from cold, from the soaking, and, yes, from fright.

'Indeed Master Uptyte.' The solicitor followed the two friends into a large drawing room. Bill had dropped his bag and was staring at the coffin, balanced upon two trestles in the centre of the room. A high pitched squeak came from Tim.

'Your great aunt,' said Arkwright, unnecessarily.

Bill gazed open mouthed, and found himself walking forward. He'd never seen a real dead person before.

'W-william. Don't.'

Malodorous had moved forward enough to see into the coffin. He stopped in deference to Tim's plea, and looked at the corpse.

Isadora Sangfroid (nee Uptyte) was a hideously memorable figure, especially in death. Long grey hair framed a painfully thin and sour looking face. A hint of a sneering smile played around the mouth, under a large beak of a nose. Clusters of warts were grouped around the nostrils. Long thin fingers were entwined upon her chest, the left hand having an extra finger if Bill wasn't mistaken. She was clad in a dusty black velvet dress. Bill was reminded of nothing so much as a figure from Madame Tussauds. His initial surprise faded and he stepped back. Timothy was facing the wall. He couldn't look at the body. Bill placed a hand upon his shoulder.

'She's at peace, Tim.'

Tim looked at him with fury. The bereaved great nephew turned to Arkwright. 'Get on with it.'

'Of course, Sir.' The solicitor's voice was tinged with sarcasm and contempt. 'If you ….gentlemen would care to take a seat.' The ill-matched pair sauntered to a large overstuffed sofa which faced an equally large television set. Arkwright unfolded Mrs Sangfroid's will. 'You understand, Mr Uptyte, that in order to claim your lega-

cy, your great aunt has stipulated that you spend tonight in the Hall?'

'Yes,' answered Tim, and Bill.

'Good,' said the solicitor. He checked his wristwatch. 'You have arrived before seven pm. I will return tomorrow at twelve noon. Your great aunt has requested that you remain within the hall. To that end all doors and windows on the outside of the building will be locked.'

Tim and Bill looked at one another in surprise, then turned back to Arkwright, who continued.

'In fact, they already are. It just remains for me to secure the front door. You have the complete run of the house for the next seventeen hours. From the attic…' His eyes gravitated upwards, '…to….the cellar.' The eyes plunged downward, then fixed on Tim and Bill. A malicious smile formed on Arkwright's lips. 'You are not to set one foot outside – until I unlock the door tomorrow. Mrs Sangfroid made two other requests. Firstly, I need to relieve you of any mechanical devices about your person.' Tim reluctantly handed over his mobile phone, blackberry and ipod. Bill shrugged. Arkwright then pointed towards the television. Bill noticed a videotape resting on top of it. Porn?

'Secondly, that videotape contains the only recording of a satellite television programme that was never transmitted.'

'Most Haunted?' asked Bill.

'Most perceptive, young man,' replied Arkwright. 'You are to watch that recording very carefully. As you watch it, the video cassette player will erase it…'

Damn! Thought Bill. Bang goes any chance of flogging it on Ebay.

'…if you fast forward the tape, it will not be erased. So you must press play and watch the tape. To make sure you do, I will have three questions for you tomorrow. And I will be checking that the tape has been erased.'

Tim and Bill sat silently.

'Any questions?'

The boys shook their heads, then Tim piped up 'Will you be

taking my great aunt's….er…body with you?'

Arkwright's malevolent grin reappeared in time with a louder clap of thunder.

'Oh no, Master Uptyte. Your great aunt will remain in the Hall…with you.'

Tim gulped. Bill had a question. 'What if something goes wrong and we..that is Tim..ends up going outside, or ….something else happens to him?'

Arkwright leaned forward. 'Any breaking of the conditions of the will means that the legacy reverts to the executors.'

Tim frowned. 'Who are…?'

'Arkwright and Hambone. Good night, gentlemen. I look forward to seeing you on the morrow.' The tall dark man turned and left the room. Tim and Bill followed him out into the hallway. The main door closed , and they heard the key turn in the lock. A short pause, then the engine of the limousine purred into life, and gravel crunched as the solicitor's vehicle moved away from the Hall.

Bill turned to Tim. 'Let's Party!!!' he yelled, and sprinted back into the drawing room. Tim followed uneasily, and watched Bill open his overnight bag and begin removing umpteen cans of lager. The unpacking finished with three bottles of wine.

'Bill, what are you doing?'

'Let's get pissed!'

'Don't be silly.'

'I'm not. Come on, Timbo, get some of that vino down you. All your fears will disappear. We'll have a good laugh at the tape, then drink till we drop. A good booze coma will prevent any nightmares, and we'll wake to the sound of old Arkwright pounding on the door. Bingo! Five hundred thou! We're in the money…' As he launched into song, Bill ringpulled his first can and took a hefty draught. 'Aaaahhhh! Loosen up, Tim!'

Timothy Uptyte was regarding Bill with suspicion. 'Don't you think we should keep a clear head while we watch this Most Haunted thing?'

'Nope – they're all the same anyway. Get stuck in!' Bill handed Tim a bottle.

'I can't drink this, William. It's the worst form of supermarket plonk.'

Bill sighed. 'I didn't purchase it because Jilly Goolden recommended the honey and boot polish bouquet, I got it because it's strong stuff and will get you ratarsed in double quick time. Get going.'

Tim put the bottle back down on the coffee table, glanced nervously at the coffin, then said, 'Let's watch the tape.'

***

Every station on the television produced static and white noise. Bill turned the VCR on and found a blank AV channel. 'Here we go,' he said. 'This is the only entertainment we're going to get tonight.'

'Savour it, William. My inheritance depends on this.'

Bill shoved in the tape and joined Timothy on the sofa. After the credits, a blonde presenter, a cameraman, a sound engineer and a somewhat camp alleged spiritualist posed outside Darklands Hall.

'Doesn't look so bad in sunlight, does it? I wonder when they filmed this?' Tim seemed to have brightened up a bit.

'It was a while back. One of the papers made a fuss about the fact they wouldn't show it. It got the series cancelled.'

'Good thing too. Did they say why they couldn't or wouldn't show it?'

Bill shifted uncomfortably. 'The people who made this episode were affected quite badly by whatever happened, and wouldn't allow the episode to be shown. And didn't want to make any more. One commited suicide, and another died in what seemed to be an accident.' He sipped his lager. 'Well, that's what The Sun said. I thought it was just hype. But, as far as I know they never screened the Darklands Hall programme.'

The characters on screen had moved into the drawing room. The sensitive began moaning and claiming he was getting voices.

Bill chuckled, but it sounded false. Tim reached for a bottle of wine, sniffed the screw top, and took a mouthful. 'Why has it all gone green? What's happened to their eyes?'

'Night camera. They're in the dark. They always do this. It's stupid, but atmospheric. Just wait. Blondie'll go nuts in a minute.'

Sure enough, the blonde presenter began to scream in terror. Tim spilt wine on his blazer. Bill glanced behind him. Isadora Sangfroid (nee Uptyte) was sitting up in her coffin glaring at him. Bill turned back to the screen, uncertain of what had chilled him most – the fact she was sitting up, the smile on her face, or the penetrating grey eyes.

'William, what's happening now? Will?'

'I..er..' Malodorous felt rather than saw his companion twist on the sofa. He closed his eyes and waited for Timothy to have hysterics. A rather sharp blow struck his upper arm. 'You sod! You nearly had me going!'

Bill glanced back. The coffin lay on the trestles as before. He looked at Tim who was grinning. The tv screen went blank as the tape came to an end, and began automatically rewinding. 'Short and sweet,' muttered Bill, realising he couldn't remember any of the programme. The VCR clicked and coughed almost apologetically, ejecting the tape onto the carpet.

'Didn't think much of that,' jeered Tim. 'Arkwright will be hard pressed to come up with three questions about it. It was just a lot of screaming, and that bloke claiming there was someone in the room. What bollocks!'

Bill eased himself to his feet and began to walk towards the coffin.

'Something wrong?' asked Tim.

The young stockbroker stood up and joined his friend. They stared. The coffin was empty.

'Shit,' said Tim, nervously.

Bill sighed. 'It's a wind up, Tim. Either your great aunt isn't dead, or that was a well made up actress. Someone is having you on. That lady must be somewhere in the house. Let's go and find her. And beat the truth out of her.'

When Tim didn't reply, Bill turned to face him. The more refined one of the duo was pale, shaking and his normally rigid hair seemed to be fighting the brylcreem in an attempt to stand on end.

'My great aunt is over there, ' he whispered, pointing at a corner of the room.

Out of the coffin, Isadora was even more imposing. Fully six feet six inches tall, she glowered down at her great nephew and his flatmate.

'William?'

'What. Timbo?'

'I can see through her. She's a ghost.'

'She's a hologram,' said Bill. He hurled his almost empty can of Kronenmeister Super-Strength Oblivion at the apparition. It passed through without disturbing the woman, struck the wall and fell to the floor, the remaining contents gurgling out in a white froth. Bill strode towards the spectral figure and also passed through. For a split second he was reminded of a couple of drug experiences he'd rather have forgotten. Every human emotion flowed through him at once. Then his nose hurt, as he walked into the wall. Stepping back, he slipped on the lager can and fell into the small spillage. Looking around, Bill refocused on Tim, now on his knees as Isadora glided eerily towards her great nephew.

'Timothy.'

Bill had never heard a voice that low pitched. It was almost subsonic. His fear grew.

'Timothy. I have need of your help. Only you can save me. The rewards will be great. I beseech you. Go to the library. Open the small drawer at the top of the desk. Remove it. There is a secret compartment. Remove the document therein and read it. Then, take down your great uncle's bound volume of The News Of The Screws for 1953. Seek the issue of May 10th. Read it. You will be prepared. Then descend and rescue me.' The spectral image faded.

'Whew! Did you get all that, Timbo?' Bill picked himself up out of the lager, brushed himself down and licked his fingers. A cursory search had failed to locate any projection equipment. Tim unsteadily gained his feet. They both turned and saw Isadora once more dormant within her coffin.

'Yes!' gasped Tim. 'To the library!'

***

The intrepid pair sprinted from the room and headed upstairs. As Tim led the way onto the second staircase, Bill realised Darklands Hall was bigger than he had first thought. Tim paused at the top of the stairs and switched on the lights. With a brief flicker the landing was illuminated. Another flicker from the window as lightning flashed. Thunder rumbled.

'Quite a storm,' said Tim, heading for the third door on the landing. The library was compact, books and journals lining three walls. They walked up to the desk. Tim wasted no time in pulling out the small drawer. He reached in and screamed, withdrawing his hand. There was a mousetrap attached. Bill had to laugh. While Tim was sorting himself out, Bill reached into the hole, and pulled out a document.

'What is it?' said Tim, right hand tucked under his left arm.

'Another copy of your great aunt's will, ' replied Bill, unfurling the papers.

'I, Isadora Isolda Iris Sangfroid, being of sound mind, blah blah blah…' Bill's eyes scanned down the testament. 'Hey! Here you go Tim! You get the Hall and all her wordly assets amounting to….' His voice trailed off.

'Let me see that,' said Tim, reaching over to pluck the document from Bill's hand.

'Where are we, Ah! …amounting to twenty-five mi…..'

The two looked at one another.

Bill said, 'Did you book a holiday from work today Tim?'

'Don't be daft, it's Satur…..'

'No, it's Friday.'

'Oh, bugger.'

'Looks like we're both out of a job, Timbo. But with that money…..'

'We can do what we like! Good old Isadora!' Tim kissed the papers.

'Glad to see you're getting with the programme,' said Bill. 'I wouldn't be surprised if that old josser Arkwright is trying to

defraud you of your inheritance. What are you doing?'

Tim was lifting down a very dusty tome from one of the shelves. It bore the legend 'N.O.T.S. Jan-Jun 1953.'

'Better see what else old Izzy was waffling about.'

'We don't have to, Tim! Arkwright's tried to fob you off with a wrong will! This must be the right one.'

'I think you'll find that the conditions are the same in that one. It's just that the prize is much bigger. Now. May the 10th wasn't it?'

As Tim opened the huge ledger, a mysterious breeze ruffled the yellowing pages of the old style broadsheet News Of The Screws. The pair looked around. There was no window in the library. The door was shut. Bill was about to check the will again, when Tim's voice breathed 'Look at this!'

The lurid headline read NUDE WITCHES ORGY!!! A grainy, black and white photograph featured naked men and women dancing around a fire al fresco, their eyes and pudenda obscured by black oblongs. 'Witchcraft! Strange goings on in Suffolk!' read Tim. 'Crikey! Do you think they mean here at the Hall?'

'Probably,' supplied Bill, his eyes drawn to another picture – an unclothed blonde kneeling in front of a sinister cowled figure. This related article was an interview with Black Sorcery expert and Best Selling Author Gregory Pendennis – who warned News Of The Screws readers to avoid all contact with so-called Black Sorcery – unless it was in one of his novels, especially the just published 'The Diabolist' – special reader offer!

'My God! Look at that woman!' said a shocked Tim, pointing at the main photograph.

'Yeah, nice boobs. Except for those black bits covering them up. Bet she was..' Bill's nose suffered a setback on its road to recovery, as Tim's fist smashed into it.

'That's my great aunt, you bastard!'

'Ow! Shit! Oh yeah…erm…sorry Timbo…I didn't see the resemblance. Blimey, look at that bloke next to her!'

'What, the dwarf? Disgusting!'

'No! The other one.'

It could only be Ezekiel Arkwright. The editors, either through a misplaced sense of humour, or because they had seen the untouched photograph, had placed the black oblong masking the solicitor's genitalia in a vertical position, giving the impression (false or otherwise) of a huge endowment. Bill and Tim felt oddly inadequate.

'What now, Timbo?'

Tinothy pondered. ' 'Then descend and rescue me.' It mentions the cellar of a lonely, sinister estate in this article. Do you think….?' Tim turned back to the newspaper.

'Oh, hello. There's old Gregory Pendennis. Did you ever read any of his books? They…hang on, hang on.' Tim was frowning, and obviously racking his brains furiously.

'One of his books featured a coven. They were all bound to one another by a …what did they call it?'

'A pact,' replied Bill.

'That's it! Did you read it?'

'No, I saw the film.'

'Great aunt Isadora's pact must be in the cellar. We retrieve it and destroy it, freeing Auntie and thwarting Arkwright. Easy peasy lemon skweezy!'

'What happened in the book?' asked Bill.

'I can't remember. Why? What happened in the film?'

'The bloke who found the pact was killed by a demon.'

'Oh, that's just movies Bill, come on.'

William Malodorous had a bad feeling about this.

***

Tim opened the door under the stairs on the ground floor. A circular flight of stone steps led down into darkness. He flicked the light switch. Nothing happened.

'I don't suppose there's a torch about, William?'

'Nope,' said Bill, who moved into the kitchen and began ransacking cupboards and drawers. Tim grinned as the dishevelled one came back into view clutching a brace of large candles.

'These'll have to do. And I found these.' Bill produced a ruler, a pencil and an elastic band. He fashioned the three items into a cross. Tim regarded him with a neutral expression.

'You're not religious, William.'

'We could be facing dark, unknown forces Timbo. Best to be prepared.'

'Do you really think that that will do any good?'

Bill looked a little sheepish. 'I'm being stupid, I know. But….'

Tim patted him on the shoulder. 'Get these candles lit then, William. And we'll …descend….' His grin faded.

The light from the candles was feeble. It made things worse by casting huge shadows on the grey stone walls. The flames flickered. Tim and Bill's imaginations ran riot. The temperature was noticeably colder when they reached the bottom of the stairway.

'Hey! A wine cellar!' Bill cheered up. 'Perhaps you could get a decent drop down here, Tim.'

'First things first,' replied Timothy, heading across the cellar towards a door at the far end. Which began to creak open before he reached it. Bill cannoned into the stationary stockbroker.

'What's up?'

'The door opened by itself.'

'Yeah?'

'Yes.'

'Well?'

'Well there might be someone in there.'

'There almost certainly is. Someone. Or something.'

'Are you trying to scare me?'

'I don't need to. You're already there.'

Tim retreated behind his friend.

'Let's get on. You go first.'

Bill swallowed.

'OK.'

He advanced through the open door, Tim close behind.

They moved into a large cold room. The fluttering candles revealed rows of chairs facing what could have been an altar. An extensive drapery was hanging from the far wall. Upon it was

depicted Eliphas Levi's goat.

'Obviously Angelwitch fans, ' muttered Bill. A number of candles were dotted about the room. The boys used their flames to light these extra wax columns, and soon the whole place was visible.

'Now,' said Tim, sounding more in control, 'Where would they hide my Great Aunt's pact?'

'It's always under the altar,' replied Bill, sounding somewhat resigned.

'You mean this?' The dwarf from the photograph sat astride the altar, twirling a silver chain with attached silver tube. Mercifully, he was fully clothed. Both Bill and Tim were convinced he hadn't been there before.

'Yeah, that's it.' Said Bill, taking a step forward. 'If you'd be so kind as to hand it over, we'll leave you in peace.'

'You really don't think it's going to be that easy, do you?' The dwarf stopped twirling, and stood up upon the altar. He raised his arms and began to recite in a monotonous drone. Neither Tim nor Bill could decipher the words.

***

Jenny Thompson steered her aging Renault 5 through the darkened woods, towards the eerie tower of light. The windscreen wipers did their best but the rain was winning. She caught site of the reassuringly familiar outline of Rich's Volvo estate and pulled up beside it. Rich dashed through the curtain of rain and slid himself into the passenger seat. When he'd caught his breath Jenny asked 'Is it the Hall?'

'Definitely,' gasped Rich. Their gaze fixed upon the light. Jenny's eyes moved downward to the smashed black limousine. It had hit the tree at a heck of a rate, the bonnet flipped back at a right angle to the rest of the vehicle, one headlight penetrating the downpour.

'Anyone…?'

'Yes, Arkwright.'

'Is he…?'

'As a doornail.'

Rich sounded savagely pleased. Jenny released a deep sigh.

'I've got to see him, Rich.'

Rich waved a hand towards the wreck.

'Be my guest.'

The girl pulled up her kagoule hood and stepped out into the rain. Despite the deluge, she approached the remains of the limo slowly, her breathing accelerating. Lightning flashed, showing her the slumped figure in the driving seat while she was still 50 metres away. Thunder rumbled and she hugged herself, willing her legs to keep going. Ever since they had been present at the Most Haunted shoot at Darklands Hall, Jenny in Make Up, Rich as a gaffer, and seen the tall solicitor standing behind the arresting figure of Isadora Sangfroid, the couple had felt unsettled. The shoot itself, and the following events, had scared them more than anything else they had encountered during their relatively short lives. When Derek Bourne, cameraman, had been found hanging from Brighton pier, Rich had found religion. He had persuaded Jenny to join him one evening and they had both found a kind of solace in the hymns and the faith surrounding them. Rich kept as close an eye as possible on subsequent events at Darklands Hall. The apparent death of Mrs Sangfroid had him banging on the door of Jenny's flat with the news. After a large brandy, he blurted out that this was what he'd been waiting for. Once Isadora was in the ground, he felt they would have nothing more to fear. The ex-TV technician had been camped out near the Hall for the last few weeks, updating Jenny by 'phone. The involvement of Ezekiel Arkwright had destroyed Rich Leighton's new-found optimism. His babbling on that last call had brought Jennie back to Suffolk. They had to see this through.

She looked through the smashed passenger window at the blood-flecked face of the dead Arkwright, and fought back an urge to spit at it. Rich splashed up behind her. He opened his bible, and began to pray. Arkwright's eyes opened and he smiled. The air around his body became misty and began to shimmer. Within a minute Jenny and Rich were looking at an empty car.

***

Bill and Tim stared in horror as the air in front of the dwarf began to densen. It shimmered, it liquefied, a shape began to form. A man. Tall. Naked. With a large black oblong vertically masking his genitalia.

'Arkwright!' they screamed.

The phantom solicitor's arms seemed to melt into his body. His legs merged into one. The oblong shrank and vanished. His skin transmuted into scales. The irises of his eyes were absorbed into the pupils, which then became ovoid, stretching and slimming. The head flattened and jutted forward. A forked tongue protruded. The lower part of the body began to stretch out across the floor. Bill jerked into conciousness from his entrancement and held up his stationery cross. The dwarf laughed and gestured with his left hand. The elastic band twanged into Bill's eye, the pencil jabbed into the back of his hand and the ruler flipped back to strike his tender nose. Tim dodged out from behind him and held out a black book.

'Whad's dat?' groaned Bill.

'A bible – I found it in the library,' said Tim, resolutely.

'A bible? In dis houd?' moaned his friend.

The dwarf laughed louder and capered behind the Arkwright-snake which was assuming massive proportions.

Timothy glanced glumly at the book cover and noticed 'Satanic' printed in small type just above 'Bible'.

'Oh dear.'

Bill had a sudden inspiration. Forgetting his pain, he grabbed a lit candle and applied it to the book in Tim's grasp. The unholy tome blazed quickly and merrily into ashes, accompanied by a yelp from Tim.

It was the dwarf's turn to moan. The Arkwright-snake hissed angrily, and began to slither towards the two companions, its neck flattening and spreading.

'It's an Arkwright-Cobra!' screamed Tim, heading for the door.

'Hope it's not a spitting one,' said Bill. 'Come on, get that door open.'

Tim rattled the door knob futilely.

'It's locked. Or stuck. Or something.'

The hissing grew louder. 'Hurry up!' Bill looked round in terror as the snake's head, still bearing slight traces of Arkwright, raised above him, and the jaws opened.

The door crashed open, knocking Tim and Bill flying past the reptile. Framed in the doorway was Isadora Sangfroid. She glared balefully at the huge cobra, which swayed uncertainly, its attention divided between this new apparition, and the two boys sprawled on the floor.

'Oh crikey!' whimpered Tim, as he watched his great aunt begin to change.

Hair spread across her elongating features. She fell forward onto all fours, and a long, thin tail waved into view.

'No! ' screeched the dwarf.

Tim clutched his unkempt chum.

'I do believe she's becoming a mongoose! William, old pal, we could be saved!'

The Isadora-mongoose sprang at the Arkwright-cobra, which coiled its body around the furry body. A battle royal commenced, the two creatures rolling and writhing around the underground chamber.

Bill and Tim scuttled up on top of the altar and Bill shaped up to the dwarf.

'C'mon then, shortarse,' he threatened.

As the diminutive figure whirled his spell-throwing arm, the cellar door burst open once more to reveal two rain-sodden humans.

'My God!' gasped Jenny.

Rich opened his bible and began to recite the 23rd psalm.

This new interruption was ignored by the supernatural creations who's conflict was reaching its climax. The Arkwright-cobra had sunk its fangs deep into the haunches of the Isadora-mongoose, which was busily rending apart any of the reptilian body it could reach. Both creatures became weaker, and the fighting less frenetic. The snake lashed its tail one final time, catching Tim's head, and

hurling him against the wall.

Jenny had a shooting-stick in her hands. Before Rich could do or say anything, she thrust the spiked end into the dwarf's chest.

The entire cellar rocked and heaved. Parts of the ceiling collapsed in showers of rubble and dust. The altar stone crumbled. As things settled, Bill, Jenny and Rich watched in awe as the two creatures became still, then were covered in a bluey-green light. This dissipated to reveal the naked body of Ezekiel Arkwright, horribly mutilated.

The shooting-stick clattered to the floor. All that remained of the dwarf was a charred outline. Bill slowly walked over to Tim. The young toff had a nasty gash on his forehead, but was breathing shallowly.

He turned to the newcomers.

'Help us?'

***

Rich and Bill carried the unconscious Tim upstairs to the Drawing Room, where they placed him gently upon the sofa. Bill checked the coffin. Mrs Sangfroid was back in place, a smile upon her dead lips. Jenny shivered.

'Thanks,' said Bill. 'Who are you people?'

Jenny and Rich stared at each other. The girl nodded, and Rich took up the story.

As he told Bill the events behind the filming of the Most Haunted episode, Bill invited them to squat on the floor, offering them lager or wine.

Shafts of sunlight entered the room as Rich finished his story.

'So,' mused Bill. 'You were never satisfied that it was all over?'

Rich looked at the coffin.

'Not until she's buried.'

Jenny put a hand on Bill's arm.

'You won't talk about any of this, will you?' The anxiety came through in her strained tones.

Bill indicated his friend's comatose shape on the sofa.

'I'll have to tell somebody something.'

***

At twelve noon precisely, a key turned in the lock of the front door of Darklands Hall.

The most appallingly normal man any of the three awake had ever seen walked into the room.

'Good mor…er…after…er…well, hello all. Which one of you is Timothy Aloysius Bertram Uptyte?'

'He is,' said Bill, pointing at Tim.

'Good gracious, what happened?' said the man.

'You are?' enquired Bill.

'Oh, please forgive me, Reginald Hambone, Arkwright and Hambone, Solicitors. My partner was due to perform this function, but unfortunately did not appear this morning, so it falls to me to sort out the matter of Mr Uptyte's inheritance.'

'It's not going to be that easy,' said Bill flatly. 'Your partner is in the cellar – or what's left of it.'

Jenny gasped and burst into tears.

Five minutes later, a white and shaking Hambone telephoned the police. Tim was taken to hospital, and Bill, Jenny and Rich subject to intense interrogation at the local copshop. All stuck to the story that Arkwright and accomplices had tried to murder Tim as part of an insane, Devilish rite. Tim had fought with Arkwright and been knocked unconscious. Bill had passed out and been woken by Jenny and Rich who had been returning to the Hall to interview Tim about his inheritance as part of a freelance project they were working on. They'd seen the crashed limousine and hurried on, heard unearthly sounds from within, broken a window and found the dead Arkwright and two unconscious lads. Bill had advised them help would come at 12 noon, and they'd decided to have a drink and wait.

The police weren't happy about this, but finding nothing else to go on, released them.

***

Timothy remained in a coma, attached to a life support machine. Bill was thrown out of the flat by Tim's dad. After a couple of nights sleeping in the shed at the tip (after regaining his job – no one else wanting to work there), Jenny found him and offered him a bed at her flat. Bill jumped at the chance, and found himself beginning to smarten up his act. The couple became closer, and, one drunken evening, a tearful Jenny revealed that Rich was dead. A car crash.

They ended up in bed, but Bill wondered if he was the new Rich.

The legacy was yet to be settled. Until Tim came out of his coma, he could inherit nothing. Reg Hambone seemed a nice enough bloke, but told Bill if the inheritance forfeited to the solicitors, he would retire and give most of it to charity, if he could sell the Hall – which they both doubted somehow.

Every other night (to avoid the family Uptyte), Jenny and Bill would sit next to Tim's hospital bed for an hour or so, and wait for any sign of recovery.

***

After six months, Bill was ready to give up. The doctors could give no diagnosis. The cut on his head was a minor injury and should not have caused the coma. It was Jenny who insisted that they stick by Tim. Bill's new smartened appearance and direction in life had meant a job with the council. He was moving up thanks to Jenny, who was now a beautician at a local salon.

***

One evening a terrible storm blew up. Bill argued that it wasn't worth the trouble of visiting the hospital in these conditions. Jenny insisted. They looked at the unconscious figure. Nothing had

changed. Bill sighed and walked to the window. He watched the rain pour down the window, and listened to the thunder.

Jenny gave a small scream.

Bill turned.

Tim's left hand was clasping hers.

'Ouch, Bill, he's hurting me.'

Bill reached over and tried to unclasp his friend's hand. It was like steel. And was tightening. Bill struggled desperately, to no avail. He heard bones crack. Jenny fainted.

Casting around for the alarm to summon a nurse, Bill saw Tim's eyes open. Saw Tim grin. Heard Arkwright's voice as Tim's hands circled his neck.

'You're dead, fucker.'

***

Bill hadn't seen Tim's face bear such a maniacal look since the boy Uptyte's mother had visited the flat early one Sunday morning and planted one of her Jimmy Choo's into a lake of Malodorous vomit. Had he really spoken in Arkwright's voice? Bill could hear the blood pounding in his ears as it became difficult to breathe. His vision was clouding. He let go of Timothy's arms and desperately felt around for some sort of weapon. His hands felt smooth cold metal. The bedpan crashed onto Tim's head wound with all the strength Bill could muster. Good job it was unused. The vice-like grip relaxed for a second and Bill rolled free.

The malevolent Tim rose from the bed. Jenny came round with a gasp and a moan. The door of the private room opened and a nurse, followed by a doctor, entered.

'Mr Uptyte! Get back into bed at once!' roared the nurse. She was sent sprawling by a flailing arm.

'Steady on, old chap!' said the doctor, in some surprise. He too was felled by the rampaging patient, who marched unsteadily through the door.

Bill, regaining his breath, helped Jenny to her feet, then sat her on the recently vacated bed. He did the same with the dazed nurse,

then dashed after his friend.

The trail was not hard to follow, as Tim was lurching this way and that, smashing any obstruction, animal vegetable or mineral, from his path. As the zombified Tim crashed through the glass of the main entrance doors into the pouring rain, Bill followed from a safe distance. The pyjamaed demon hauled the driver from an ambulance, and drove off at high speed, leaving paramedics and a stretchered patient stranded in the wet.

Bill had driven the Renault 5 that night and still had the keys. He ran to Jenny's vehicle, jumped inside and drove after the ambulance. Not having paid for his parking ticket he had no choice but to crash through the barrier, damaging the little car considerably, and ageing the jobsworth ticket collector by a good ten years. Thankfully the windscreen wipers still worked and Bill kept up the pursuit.

The ambulance was easily kept in sight ; the blue lamps still revolving as they careered through the town. After a while, Bill realised they were heading back to the Hall. He checked the petrol gauge. Phew! Should make it.

The ambulance coughed its last a good two miles from Darklands. Bill pulled up behind it, and followed the stumbling monster that had been his flatmate through the still teeming rain, puzzled by the absence of any other pursuit, police or otherwise.

As he trailed the shambling Tim, he realised there were lights on in the Hall.

Uptyte staggered up to the door and smashed his fists upon it. It swung open. Tim crept inside. Bill tiptoed to the door and peered inside. The wet foot prints led to the drawing room. Bill took a deep breath, made his way along the entrance hall, and pushed open the door.

Tim stood in front of a table piled high with gold, jewellery, bank notes, stock certificates and bearer bonds.

A trembling Reginald Hambone was seated behind the treasure trove.

'Mr. Uptyte! Are you alright? I didn't expect..'

'No! You didn't expect, did you?!'

Hambone looked even more appalled as he recognised the voice emanating from Timothy Uptyte's lips.

'Ez…Ezekiel?'

'Oh yes. Ezekiel. Thought you'd have it all, did you? No. No way. I've worked too hard, too long for this. Given up too much. Even my soul. I may be damned, Reg, but I'm going to have a good time before I go to Hell. In whatever form I can. If that bitch Isadora hadn't betrayed me at the last, I'd have been celebrating long before now. And you'd waste it, wouldn't you, Reg? Give it to charity? Try to do some good? No. Not an option.'

Reginald Hambone reached into his jacket and produced a silver chain with a small silver tube attached. He placed this upon the table and then reached into his jacket again. He placed an identical tube and chain next to the first.

The darkness behind Hambone seemed to swirl. Bill strained his eyes from the doorway. Isadora Sangfroid seemed to be standing behind her other solicitor. There was another figure behind her. Bill couldn't make it out.

A low growling sound came from Tim. His hand reached for the two chains.

'Stop, Ezekiel.'

That incredibly low voice. Isadora had stepped from the shadows. She seemed younger, more vibrant.

'Your vice, your corruption, your evil. Worthless, Ezekiel. Your grand designs have been revealed for what they are….nothing. Your worship of false idols has gained you temporary life, but no real power. I was saved, Ezekiel. Saved from your pit of excrescence. You are indeed damned. Welcome to damnation!'

The two tubes floated up into Isadora's hand.

Bill realised that the figure behind Isadora was Rich. More outlines were appearing. He wasn't exactly sure but he could have sworn they were other Most Haunted staff.

'NNNnnnnooooooo!'

What had been Tim lurched forward to grasp the pacts in Isadora's hand. They disappeared with a crackle of flame. Tim's body was hurled across the room, to smash against the wall and

crumple to the floor.

Bill walked dazedly into the room. Hambone was slumped in the chair.

Tim's great aunt was smiling at him.

'Take good care of my nephew, Master William,' she whispered. 'Spend his money wisely.'

She and the spectral television technicians with her slowly faded from view.

Bill crouched down beside Tim, whose eyes opened.

'Ow, my flaming head!' he groaned. 'Did we make it through the night?'

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CERBERUS RISING

by Neil Christopher

'David Glass - I have an appointment to see Sir Robert Britten.'

The receptionist, if that's what he was, stared intently at the ledger then got up and disappeared through a door behind his desk. He was gone long enough to make Glass feel uncomfortable before returning with a slick plastic card with the word VISITOR printed in bold.

'Please be seated.'

Glass sat in some deeply uncomfortable plastic and metal chair and looked for something to read. There wasn't anything. The heat had still not gone from what had been a scorchingly hot July day and the lack of air conditioning was making him feel extremely uncomfortable. Finally, the phone on the desk rang and an attractive young woman appeared through some double doors at the far end of the Foyer.

'Mr Glass?' He nodded. She smiled. 'Follow me please.'

They took a lift to the 14th floor and stepped out into a landing with a wall of windows looking out over the sights of Lambeth and a sign that read 'Floor 14 - Eastern Europe Section'. The pretty assistant showed him through a set of doors, into a much more plush waiting room with two desks in it and through a small door away from the main department entrance and into a beautifully appointed office.

'Mr Glass is here, Sir Robert.'

A short, rather frail-looking man in a tweed suit with short grey hair and half-moon glasses stood up and Glass gingerly took the offered hand and received a remarkably robust handshake in return.

'Glad you could make it Mr Glass. Do you prefer Mr Glass or is David acceptable?'

'David is fine.'

'Tea?'

David shook his head, remembering the queasy taxi ride.

'No thank you - bit of a rally driver in the taxi, I'm afraid.'

Sir Robert let out a booming guffaw.

'They're bastards round here. Do yourself a favour and take the tube next time. Lambeth North is just round the corner. Sit down, please.' David settled into a huge and ornate green leather chair on the other side of the oak desk to Sir Robert, who had produced a thick file from a draw. He opened it, adjusted his glasses a little and began to read.

'David Simon Glass, born Rochdale, Lancashire on the 29th of January 1950. Attended Manchester Grammar School, before reading international law at Cambridge between 1968 and 1971. Recruited into MI5 in last year at Cambridge. Post-Graduate degree in Psychology at the University of Nottingham between 1971 and 1973. Been working with MI5 ever since, oh except for 1977, when you spent a year on an exchange programme with the FBI, in the Behavioural Science Unit at Quantico, Virginia. Now part of MI5's special projects team. Unmarried, normal relationship with surviving parent, heterosexual and not believed to be an abuser of alcohol or drugs. Mental problems six years ago, took an extended medical absence but signed back as fit for duty by the MI5 Psychological welfare section in July 1978 and not a day off sick since then.' He slapped the file shut and looked over his glasses at David. 'You come very highly recommended, David - Bryers really didn't want you coming here.'

David shrugged.

'I don't know what the job is yet, so he might get me back sooner than he thought.'

Britten cracked the smallest and briefest of smiles.

'You know I can't brief you here - It's an in-country job, requiring your special skills. Something unusual - I think you might like it.' He pulled out a package of documents. 'If you agree to do it, you'll receive a temporary promotion for the duration of the job to the rank of deputy section head. If you do a good job, we'll look to permanently transfer you at that level of seniority.'

David thought for a second, but only for a second. MI5 was fine, but it was like being the goalkeeper, whereas field officers with MI6 were the star strikers. It paid better and you saw the world on Her Majesty's Government's tab.

'Where am I going?'

Britten this time braved a wide smile and pushed the documents across the desk.

'You're going to Romania.'

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It may have been a need to impress, but Britten had ensured that Glass was flying first class. He'd heard diplomats talking about the postings in Eastern Europe, how austere the countries were, and was glad for the last taste of western decadence. Britten hadn't given much away even after he'd taken the job and Glass mulled over what it was likely to be that required his 'special skills'. He'd talked to one or two MI6 agents during his time with MI5 and they were all united on one thing, you could get away with a lot more in your own country than you could in someone else's. None of them had been like James Bond. One had told him that most people joined MI6 to drink martinis, sleep with beautiful women and drive expensive cars, but when you left, the skill that you left with wasn't the ability to kill with your bare hands, or drive like Jackie Stewart, but the ability to blend seamlessly into the background, wherever you were. Long-serving MI6 agents were professional chameleons, the ability to avoid attention being a survival skill more important to your longevity than karate or use of a handgun.

The British Airways flight landed at Bucharest International Airport at 4pm local time. Glass was travelling on a diplomatic passport, so whilst the customs officers harassed him, he recognised it as part of the great game and bore the minor indignities with relatively good cheer, helped by the fact that British passport holders without diplomatic status were being treated more curtly than he. He walked through passport control with minimum fuss and into the huge foyer of the main terminal. He walked to a newsstand and bought a packet of Marlboro and a copy of the International Herald-Tribune and stood around, watching the throng of humanity move through the airport.

After about ten minutes, a woman with long black hair and sharp intelligent eyes appeared in the double doors of the airport's main entrance. She saw the huge numbers of people moving around and her face dropped a little although she did hoist up a cardboard sign which read 'GLASS'.

'I'm David Glass.'

She smiled a tired smile.

'Oh thank God. I thought I'd have to wade through here for hours. I'm Anna, I'm with the British Embassy. Let's go.'

Bucharest airport was located well to the north of the city and the drive took forever. The outskirts of Bucharest was a riot of tatty concrete, with tower blocks looming over small shops and slum housing. People were going here and there, and the streets were full of bicycles, ancient skodas and VWs. On the street corners were fat-necked balding men in roll-necked sweaters bedecked in cheap gold jewellery - Romanian secret policemen and their presence, talking to young girls and shaking down people for loose change reminded Glass where he was. The air was thick with smoke, pollution and drizzle and he felt the twin pangs of homesickness and excitement. They crossed a thick, filthy river and where traffic forced them to stop, the locals would eye the car carefully, going out of their way to avoid a contact initiated by those inside and careful not to attract the attention of the security men or uniformed police.

The British Embassy was a solid four-floored building set in

beautiful gardens. Anna pulled up behind the building and arranged for his bags to be taken to his room within the Embassy complex. She also pointed him in the direction of the office of the MI6 Section Head in the Trade Delegation offices.

Glass sat down and Hotchkiss waited until the door had closed before he began. Hotchkiss was the section head of the MI6 section in Romania, third biggest in the Eastern Bloc after the Soviet and East German sections. Romania was run by Nicolae Ceausescu, a dictator of savage reputation but who ran his country with a degree of autonomy from Moscow that was not permitted by any other client state. There was no love lost between Romanians and Russians and Moscow tended to turn a blind eye to Ceausescu's occasional cosying up to The West partially because the Soviets knew they wouldn't be able to pull an invasion of Romania without facing 12 million screaming nationalists and a war that would make Vietnam look like an evening walk in the park. In espionage terms, that made Romania a bit like Tombstone in the old west, a place where adversaries could talk and make things happen on a local level without actually having to talk openly to each other on the bigger, more important stage.

Hotchkiss was in his late 50s. He was a well dressed, slight man with short-cropped black hair, rather sleepy looking brown eyes and a lipless mouth. He sat behind an ornate desk. He'd been Section head in Romania for 6 years, transferring from the Office in the British Embassy in Havana. He had a reputation for playing a straight bat. 'He's as dull as bread and water', Sir Robert had said in London, '…but he does run a tight ship.' As the secretary who'd shown Glass in closed the door, Hotchkiss looked up from his desk, sat up and offered Glass his hand.

'Welcome to Bucharest, Mr Glass. Sir Robert tells me this is your first stint 'in country'.' He didn't give Glass time to respond. 'Glad to see you got here in one piece, because we've got a real pickle here and it's a problem that isn't our normal area of expertise.'

He carefully placed a pile of photographs in front of Glass, who gingerly picked them up. The first was of a dour, grey haired

man in a cheap suit with a ruddy complexion. It wasn't a typical surveillance shot, captured on the way out of a copy shop or Hotel bedroom, but was deliberately posed.

'That man is Florin Popu. He's the head of the Investigative Bureau for the Central Province of the Romanian State Police Service. He's also one of our highest placed agents in the country.'

Glass raised an eyebrow. Normally MI6 section heads were extremely careful who they told about agents' identities, and this one was clearly a big fish. Glass had to remind himself he'd been in the country for a matter of hours. He flipped that photograph and there was another, this time with Popu talking to one of the familiar bull-necked secret policemen he'd noticed on the drive from the airport. Hotchkiss continued.

'I handle Florin personally, and he's important to us because he's former *Securitate* – Romanian Secret Police – and he still has the ear of the some very senior *Securitate* officials. He's our best early warning system and we need him where he is. However, there's a problem.'

Glass flipped the next photograph. It was a body, or at least had been a body. Now it was a mass of torn fabric, bloody bones, flesh and tissue. He flipped that photograph and there was another, then another, then another. The final photograph was of another, though this one appeared to have been spared the brutality of the others, though the man in it was dead, killed by a head trauma, he had been spared the savage post-mortem assault. Glass had seen some appalling crimes and had perpetrated one or two himself in the service of his country, but these were difficult even for him to view.

He put the photographs down, face down and looked at Hotchkiss, but said nothing.

'They call him *Ci Vultur*, The Vulture. He's killed twelve people that we know of in the mountains north of Bucharest, and left their remains for the wolves and bears. Now Florin is a great agent, but he's not a very good policeman so when it was made clear by Ceaucecsu himself that Florin was to take personal charge of the investigation, and that his future rested on catching this psychopath, then we knew he was going to need help.'

Glass laughed nervously.

'I'm a spycatcher – you need someone from Scotland Yard'

Hotchkiss regarded him carefully and took a sip from his coffee.

'You spent time with the profilers at the FBI, I understand. You've also used profiling to identify and turn foreign agents in MI5.' He shrugged. 'You might not be Pierce Brooks, but you're the best we've got. I'm not going to hand Florin's fate over to a bloody beat bobby!'

Glass rubbed his temples.

'Last time I tried this, it didn't work out so well for anyone involved, and I'm not going to point the guy out walking down the street.'

Hotchkiss leaned back in his chair.

'Fair enough. Frankly I have no idea whether Florin will catch this guy or not – perhaps he hides his light under a bushel, but he gives the impression of being a party man first and a police officer second. Whatever you can do – a profile based on the evidence to date, anything, will help.'

'This Popu – is he trustworthy?'

'Probably. He turned for money and the promise that we'd extract him in a year or two but he's got a lot to lose if the Russians find out about him. We suspect that he's being used to some degree by the *Securitate* to pass messages to us about the Soviets, so he's probably protected by some senior people in the Romanian Communist Party. He'll co-operate. He's already sent us copies of all the crime scene photographs and information from the autopsies. I've had it sent to your room. I'll arrange a meeting between you as soon as is practicable.'

There was a brief silence.

'Is there anything else?'

Glass couldn't think of anything, so Hotchkiss went back to his pile of paperwork.

'Come see me if you need anything. I'll need to see progress reports every other day. Sir Robert has taken a personal interest in this, so it's a career-maker if you get it right.' The threat was left

unsaid, but was there nonetheless.

Glass got up, picked up the photographs and left Hotchkiss's office.

His rooms were located in an annex at the rear of the embassy and when he let himself in he was not surprised to see that the accommodation was functional rather than luxurious. His bags had been left in the centre of the bedroom/living room which had a double bed, TV, desk with chair and a wardrobe and chest of draws. From there a door led into a pretty plain bathroom and a second door led into the smallest kitchen Glass had seen outside a camper van. The sole window overlooked the garden at least, so he cracked it open, ignoring the cooling night air and debated putting all his clothes away before deciding against it.

He opened the duty free bag, took out the bottle of Jim Beam and a couple of cans of coke, ran a glass under the tap and poured himself a drink and scattered the paperwork Hotchkiss had had delivered to the room over his bed. He took out a Dictaphone, kicked off his shoes and began examining the paperwork.

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Glass woke up the following morning still dressed, with papers and photographs and notes scattered all around him. He shook himself awake, gathered the material up and put it on the desk, before taking a long shower in only fitfully warm water. He then packed his stuff away, dressed and noticed that the light on his telephone was blinking. He had a message. He picked up the receiver and pressed the blinking button. It was from Hotchkiss.

'Good morning Mr Glass. I have arranged a meeting for you with Mr Popu at a place we use in the City Centre. The meeting is scheduled for 11:00am. Anna will drive you there. Please be prompt.'

He looked at the clock. It was ten past ten.

'Shit!' He snatched up the documents, his notes and his coat and keys and bolted for the door.

On the drive into the centre of Bucharest, Glass parted with

tradition and sat up-front in the noisy, black embassy Zil, a hugely uncomfortable Russian-built car as Anna navigated a range of bizarre obstacles from goats to market stalls.

They drove largely in silence, except for the occasional expletive aimed at a particularly naïve pedestrian or errant sheep.

'This fucking town is full of the suicidal and stupid'.

'Can I turn on the radio?'

She looked down at the archaic stereo system.

'Good luck – I hope you like classical music and being ranted at, capitalist pig.'

Glass twiddled the knob of the radio, eventually finding some Berlioz and they completed the journey to *Vallon Sonore*.

They parked in a small medieval square opposite a coffee shop.

'See those heavies?' Anna pointed over he shoulder once she'd parked the car. 'Popu will be in there. Be nice to him, he's a sweetie.'

'What will you do?'

'Chat with the *Securitate* officers, look in the shops, walk along the river. Wait by the car when you're finished.'

Glass collected up his paperwork.

'See you in a bit.' With that, he got out of the car, crossed the square and walked into the coffee shop under the gaze of the security guards which only fell when Anna appeared and their scowls turned to rather disturbing smiles.

At the front of the shop sat Popu, looking just like he did in the photographs Hotchkiss had shown him. He was smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee the colour of ink. Glass took the chair opposite and ordered his own coffee.

'Mr Glass?' Glass offered his hand and Popu shook it wearily. His voice was thick and deep and he spoke slowly and deliberately. 'A pleasure to meet you. You have seen the files?'

Glass eyed the policeman carefully. He was in his late fifties, with slicked back dirty blonde hair that was greying in the temples. The lids of his eyes were heavy and he had a double chin, but the eyes were bright and sharp. He wore a cheap dark blue suit with a

white shirt and no tie.

'I have.' He opened the file and read from his own notes. 'Killer is blood type O - identified from saliva in some of the wounds. Youngest victim is a 13 year old male, oldest a 67 year old woman. Five of the victims were female, seven male. No apparent sexual assault, though that doesn't mean the motive isn't sexual. The victims were not linked by age, sex, height, weight, race or known sexual orientation. Cause of death unknown except in one case, which was exsanguination from a deep penetrating wound to the left eye and forehead, possibly caused by a scythe or sickle. All except one victim was mutilated savagely post- or peri-mortem. Do your morticians test for raised free-histamine levels as part of an autopsy?' Popu shook his head, his eyes never leaving Glass as he sipped his coffee. 'Then we don't know if mutilation took place whilst the victims were alive or dead. Significant post-mortem injuries from wild animals, with different victims being attacked by wolves, bears and lynx. You still have wild bears and wolves here?'

'In the mountains.' Popu put his cup down. 'All this is in our report, I want to know how you can help me?'

Glass placed the file on the table.

'There are no known links between the victims other than they were killed in the same mountain range, within 40 miles of each other. The Killer isn't going for a set victim profile, which suggests the act itself is important, not the type of victim. These are crimes of opportunity, but they're well planned or he's extraordinarily lucky. He either leaves bodies where he knows scavengers will find them, or he mutilates bodies to make it look like the work of wild animals. He may keep large dogs for the purpose. He's probably male, between the ages of 18 and 35, was probably raised in an abusive household and probably works a menial job and lives alone. He's a cannibal, or has cannibalistic tendancies, like Albert Fish. His cannibalism is probably a sexual kink.' He thought back to the first time he stepped into Burrell's Texas farmhouse and suppressed a shudder.

Popu laughed, a low rumble that Glass felt rather than heard. He then produced his own file, set it on the table and put on a pair

of half-moon glasses. He licked his lips.

'You are Mr David Glass - you worked with the Behavioural Sciences Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigations at Quantico, Virginia. You were part of an exchange programme between one of your intelligence services and your American equivalents. Whilst you were in the United States, you were on the I-80 task force that found the man your tabloid newspapers called …what was it, *The Devil's Peak Ripper*?'

Glass looked at Popu with a mixture of surprise and disgust. Hotchkiss must have told his favourite pet poodle all about Glass - probably the price for foisting the man into Popu's investigation.

'His name was Jackson Hubbard.'

Popu nodded slowly.

'Ahh yes.' He looked at the file again. 'He killed eleven women along the Interstate between Casper, Wyoming and Idaho Falls, Idaho in the mid - 1970s.'

'Eleven that we know of.'

'Now he is residing in a high security mental institution in Eugene, Oregon.' He looked up from the file. 'If it had happened here, we would have taken him to the car park and shot him in the head.'

'An effective, if not especially enlightened approach to the treatment of severe mental disorder.' Glass disliked having a dark period of his past so clinically dissected in such an off-hand way by a man sat in a suit that probably cost less that the packet of cigarettes in his pocket. Popu, however either didn't recognise sarcasm, or simply let the insult slide.

'You were instrumental in the apprehension of Hubbard and the FBI were so impressed that they then sent you to assist in the capture of another of your decadent western serial-killers called...'

'MacKenzie Lee Burwell.' Glass interrupted. He did everything he could to stop himself squirming in his seat. Even saying the name out loud made him feel the old, familiar tightening in his scrotum and his skin creep.

Popu looked up from his file for a second. Glass held his gaze steady.

'My files are somewhat hazy on the circumstances of that case, other than his colourful nom-de-plume - what was it?'

'The papers called him the *Shenandoah Cannibal* , the local FBI office referred to him as the *Greenbrier Devil*, because he used the Greenbrier River to dump what was left of his victims.' Glass never spoke of his experience in the Shenandoah Valley except to the psychiatrist that MI5 had insisted he see after he had returned broken and hollow from the aftermath of it all.

'And?' Popu waited expectantly.

'He was a degenerate monster and now he's dead and all you need to know is that I caught him.' Glass leaned over the table and spoke quietly through clenched teeth, eyes ablaze with anger. 'I've got the history of success in this field, you appear to have thin air. If you want my help I'll give it. If you want me here so you can take cheap shots at the western screw-up policeman, find your good socialist psychopath yourself or take a bullet from Ceaucescu, I honestly couldn't give a shit which.'

Popu laughed a full and rich rumble which was ended by a racking cough violent enough to rock the coffee table.

'Relax, Mr Glass, I am not mocking you. I am trying to establish if I have been sent a… how you say?' He fumbled for the words. 'A 'pro'?'

'Mr Popu, I have no idea.'

Popu looked at the young man with the stubble, short brown hair and piercing blue eyes and slowly stood up.

'Mr Hotchkiss thinks I am a poor policeman, Mr Glass. Perhaps I am. I do, however care for the people under my protection and this psychopath is, as you have said, in possession of great cunning. Whatever help you can give me, I will willingly and gratefully accept.' He held out his hand and Glass took it slowly. 'Now, I take it your people have given you an alias of some kind.'

'My cover is Dr Jaques Callis, a French-Swiss professor of Forensic Science at the University of Geneva. My Mother is French-Swiss, so I speak the language with the appropriate accent. You called me in to assist with your case. The University of Geneva is well known for assisting in cases like these and they assist us by

providing confirmation to agencies who may check any credentials.' Popu nodded his approval.

'Good. Shall we start by visiting the most recent crime scene?'

'Yes.'

'Then we shall go. I will drive.'

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The concrete peaks and valleys of Bucharest began to fall away behind them as the car sped through the Romanian countryside, the afternoon sunshine lighting the fields of wheat and oats with a warm, yellow glow. Ahead, brooding in the distance were the forested, black granite peaks of the Carpathian mountains. Occasionally the car would make an erratic turn or swerve violently to avoid a pothole and Popu would curse, at least Glass assumed it was cursing, in his native tongue.

The pace dropped after about an hour's driving as the road surface deteriorated and began to climb up into the mountains. Until that point, the landscape had been pastoral, with tiny fields surrounded by enormous hedges and streams, full of people working, full of sheep and cattle. Now the landscape had changed. The countryside became less obviously tamed by mans influence. Thick forest of Italian pine and cork oak began to close around the road. It seemed darker and colder and on the occasional stretch where the trees retreated from the side of the barely perceptible track, there was a sheer drop or a ravine big enough to swallow a city. Glass had spent time in the Scottish Highlands, he loved the solitude and the majesty. These mountains were different. They felt dark.

Popu pulled the car to a stop in an open section of woodland next to the road. It had been marked off from the road by a scruffy piece of rope and a bored-looking policeman sat on a rock next to the rope, reading a newspaper and absently picking his nose. He looked up as the car approached and stopped and eyed it carefully until Popu got out, at which point the threw down the paper and stood to attention. Popu walked over to him and said a few words to the man who snapped a perfect salute and ran off into the woods.

Glass walked over.

'What did you say to him?'

'I instructed him to provide us with privacy.'

Glass looked into the clearing in the pines. It was little more than a lay-by to allow traffic to pass on the adjacent track. There was a tree stump at one end of the opening that appeared to be stained black. The vegetation and earth around the stump was also dark.

'He was 15 years old.' Popu stared at the stump sadly. 'He should have been in school, but he was herding sheep on the upper slope of the mountain for his family. They are poor.' He laughed bitterly. 'It would appear that the great socialist revolution has a fear of heights. There are many poor in these mountains.'

'He was found on this tree stump?' Popu nodded sadly then looked away.

'Yes. His body is in the Mortuary in Bucharest. Until we find this animal, his family cannot bury him.'

Glass looked around. The spot was isolated and it had been fifteen or twenty minutes of driving since he'd seen a house or farmstead. It seemed impossible that whomever did this lived in the mountains as such communities were often small and self-policing.

'This is an ideal spot to dump a body from a car or truck. Perhaps our friend isn't local.'

'Other sites were also in openings in the forest. Some were near tracks or roads, others were not. I think this man must know these mountains.'

'A Hunter?'

Popu shrugged.

'Perhaps, or a forester.' Their thoughts were cut short by the roar of a truck engine. The both turned to look down the mountain and saw a military truck with canvas sides struggling up the mountain. It wheezed it's way along the track and screeched to a halt next to Popu's car. Glass looked at the policeman.

'Some of yours?'

A well dressed man in a long woollen trench coat stepped down from the cab and was accompanied by a soldier several inch-

es shorter than the first man, but with a shorter haircut and nondescript fatigues. He shouldered an AK-74, which he kept aim on Popu and Glass as the taller man approached. He both saw the ensign on his shoulder flashes. The hammer and sickle. Russians. Both men approached Popu, but the Soldier spoke.

'Who are you?' It was Russian, though Glass, who spoke Russian fluently, couldn't place the accent.

'I am Florin Popu of the Investigative Bureau for the Central Province of the Romanian State Police Service. What are you doing at my crime scene?' The Soldier smiled a thin smile but instead of answering, waved the barrel of his gun at Glass.

'And him'

'He is Dr Callis from the University of Geneva. He is assisting this investigation.'

The soldier walked over to Glass and looked him up and down.

'Papiers s'il vous plait.'

Glass handed over his fake documents. The soldier examined them and looked at Glass.

'Une moment.' He walked back to the truck and Glass and Popu waited for several minutes whilst the soldier did whatever he was doing, all the while the man in the trench coat was watching them. Eventually, the soldier returned and handed Glass's papers back to him.

'Merci, Monsieur.' Glass smiled.

'Ne pas probleme'. With that a number of other soldiers descended from the back of the truck and the man who'd checked Glass's paperwork joined them. The man in the trench coat walked over to Popu and Glass.

'I am Colonel Krasov of the Soviet Army Medical Cadre. Your Government has requested the assistance of the Soviet Government in this case. Your crime scene is now my crime scene.'

Popu exploded.

'What do you fucking mean? Your crime scene? On who's authority? This is outrageous!!' Krasov regarded him with no evi-

dent emotion.

'I suggest you discuss with your superiors. In the mean time, please clear the area.' Glass placed a hand on the incandescent Popu who, staring wildly at Krasov all the while, walked back to the car, got in and as soon as Glass was in the other seat, gunned the engine and disappeared in a mist of mud and stones.

They drove down the mountain track at a hellish speed and Glass could see the white in Popu's knuckles as he gripped the steering wheel. Eventually, Glass could take the bumps and the blind bends and speed no longer.

'Popu, Stop!!'

Popu stopped the car. He then ranted for five minutes mostly in Romanian, but occasionally lapsing into both Russian and English.

'Lying Fucking Russians. I know they have no invite. What do they fucking want? They busy themselves in our affairs to keep their fucking soldier from drinking vodka and causing trouble!'

Glass waited for the wave of anger to subside, which it did when Popu slumped back in the seat, face as black as thunder and lit a cigarette.

'The soldiers weren't normal infantry grunts. How many Soviet infantry do you know who can speak anything but Russian?'

Popu grunted.

'Many cannot even do that!'

'Yet this guy spoke to me in perfect French. Notice how short he was?' Popu nodded.

'They speak French, have AK-74s which aren't standard infantry issue and they're all short-arses.'

Popu looked puzzled for a while until Glass lost patience.

'They're either airborne forces or Spetsnaz. Parachute regiments like short soldiers and both are taught foreign languages because they're supposed to be dropped directly behind enemy lines. These boys have come directly from Russia. What's so important about this case that the Russians are prepared to bus in their best troops for it?'

'And this Krasov. He is a doctor. Why?'

They sat in silence for a minute or two. Popu finished his cigarette and cast it out of the car window.

'We go back to Bucharest. I will place a tail on these Russians and find out if this Krasov is telling the truth. You must find out who he is. I will call you.'

They drove the rest of the way back to Bucharest in silence.

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At 7am Glass rose and showered and went across the quadrant to the refectory where he picked at his breakfast uninterested in it. Anna sat next to him and made him jump.

'You look awful.'

Glass looked at her. She didn't.

'Thanks. You should see me when I'm tired.'

'Not sleeping eh? Was it the brake-fluid drinkers coming out of the clubs or the endless array of biting insects?' He shrugged.

'I always find it difficult to sleep in a new bed.' Anna raised an eyebrow whilst sipping her coffee.

'Good news if you've got company, not so good if you're on your own. You need to get drunk. Meet me for lunch today, I need to talk to someone who's lived in the real world at some point in the last three months.'

With that she was gone, and Glass went back to pushing his breakfast around on his plate, admittedly feeling a little better than he had earlier.

His teleconference was scheduled for 10am local time, and he was in Hotchkiss' office ten minutes early. They made small talk for a minute or two, but mainly Hotchkiss did paperwork. Finally, Sir Robert was patched through, and Glass gave them a briefing on the little progress he'd made so far. Both Hotchkiss and Sir Robert were particularly interested in the Russian involvement.

'What was the name of the fellow in the long coat, Glass?'

Glass consulted his notes.

'Krasov. He said he was a Colonel in the Soviet Army Medical Cadre.' Hotchkiss stood up and went to filing cabinet and retrieved

a file, opened it and pushed it in front of Glass. There was a blurry photograph of the man in the overcoat.'

'Is that him?' Glass nodded and Hotchkiss slumped back in his chair.

'Who is he?'

'He's Colonel Andreyev Krasov. He used to run the Virology department of the Moscow State University. Then he went to the Noginsk State Virology labs where he worked on a range of biological agents. Since 1978 he's been the Red Army's point man on biological warfare. French intelligence put him in Equatorial Guinea during the Marburg Virus outbreak in 1979, he was certainly in Sverdlovsk in 1980 during an anthrax outbreak and he was tracked by the US in Bangladesh when they had the 1985 Psittacosis epidemic.'

Sir Robert chimed in.

'He's very important to the Soviets, which is why he has Spetsnaz bodyguards. Since the mid-1980's he's been trawling the world looking for interesting new potential biological weapons, it's all he does. We've had confirmation that his labs in Noginsk have pure strains of smallpox, Brucellosis, Ebola Zaire, West Nile Virus, Chagas Disease, pneumonic plague. If he's on your case, it means something in this case is making their scientists twitchy, and that makes me twitchy.'

Glass cut in.

'Sir, I'm no doctor..' he corrected himself. 'I'm no medical doctor, nor am I experienced enough to deal with something on this scale, perhaps you should consider someone more battle-tested.'

'I tend to agree, Sir' It was Hotchkiss. 'Glass has done a good job so far, but Krasov's involvement kicks this up the tree, does it not?'

'Nonsense. The only way we are going to find out why Krasov's involved in this is to help your Popu fella find the culprit first, and Glass is better suited to that task than anyone else I can send you. Mr Glass, keep us informed on a daily basis.' With that, the phone call terminated and Hotchkiss and glass sat in their chairs looking bemused at each other.

'Nice try, though'. Hotchkiss said as he put Krasov's file back in the cabinet. 'Watch yourself. If Krasov's involved, he's there because someone way up in the Soviet political stratosphere wants him there. Walk softly.' With that, Glass gathered together his files and stepped from the office, dumped his stuff in his room and went searching for Anna and a much needed distraction.

By the time Glass had returned from lunch with Anna, there had been a phone call for him. The clumsy answer phone connected to the telephone in his room was blinking. He pressed the button. It was Popu.

'Glass, The Russians are moving to a place in the mountains near to Rucar. They have many soldiers and are moving quickly. Meet me at the end of the road where your Embassy is located at 2pm. We must follow them.'

Glass looked at his watch , snatched up his camera and ran for the door. When he reached the end of the street, Popu was waiting for him in a battered VW. In a car in front were Romanian plain clothes policemen. He jumped in and Popu gunned the car.

'They left quickly. I have a *Securitate* man following them by helicopter who is telling the men in the car in front where they are going…' Popu weaved at a frankly mind-boggling speed through the streets of Bucharest, dodging market stalls, bicyclists, pack animals and drunks by the width of a coat of paint. Glass tried not to look terrified, but failed. '…If they want to catch our monster, perhaps they have…how you say, a lead?'

They drove for an hour along roads that seemed identical to the drive they had taken the day before, only this time the sky was dark with grey clouds and a thick drizzle fell, making the place seem colder and more forbidding. The tops of the Carpathians were clad in mist and low cloud and the trees dripped with moisture. The tracks were slippery and both cars had to slow to a crawl as the tarmac gave way to wet mud and the climb got steeper.

Abruptly, they pulled off the road onto a forest track away from site and stopped. Popu leapt out with energy that he'd given no previous indication he possessed and barked orders at the policemen, who began fanning out into the woods. Popu returned

to the car.

'The *Securitate* agent has reported that the Russians have stopped about a mile ahead of us.' He went to the boot of the car and pulled out two revolvers of unknown vintage and serviceability. He offered one to Glass who shook his head. Popu shrugged and put both guns into the waistband of his pants. 'He is observing. I have sent my men to find them and radio me.'

Glass picked up his Polaroid camera and they sat by the car whilst Popu smoked a cigarette. It was gone four and the sky was just beginning to darken as afternoon began to drift into evening. The radio crackled into life. Popu listened, then spoke into it short bursts of Romanian Glass didn't understand. He threw his butt to the floor and stepped on it.

'They are watching something on a ridge on the other side of the valley. My men have no eyeglasses, so they cannot see what the Russian see. There are fourteen Russians, Krasov is with them.' He checked both guns and put on an overcoat. 'We go.'

They walked for about fifteen minutes through thick forest along a logging track before the woodland faded away and they were faced with a deep wooded ravine, perhaps half a mile across. They crouched at the base of the tree line and both men produced binoculars and scanned the ridge against which they were perched as it spread out in front of them, curving away into the distance.

About half a mile to their left, Glass picked up the Soviet soldiers. Krasov was staring through a small telescope on a tripod at something on the ridge on the other side of the ravine. Glass tried to establish what they were looking at, but his binoculars were not very powerful and the fading light made picking out detail difficult. Popu nudged him.

'Over there.' He pointed without taking his eyes from the binoculars. 'On those rocks.'

There was a pinnacle of rocks on the other side of the ravine and shuffling about was a creature. Glass assumed it was a bear - it was furry but even at this distance and in this light he could see it was huge. It was pulling and tugging at something out of view. Suddenly it froze and began to sniff the air.

'What the hell is that?'

Then it was gone, moving quickly into the trees and into shadow. A split second later, both men heard a thick, guttural howl. The hairs on the back of Glass's neck stood up. The noise rolled around the ravine and echoed against the bare granite rock.

'What the fuck was that?'

Popu had focussed on the Russians.

'They are moving.' Sure enough, Russian soldiers were rapelling down the ravine, Krasov in the lead. They counted ten descending on thin nylon ropes, guns slung across their backs when a second howl, even deeper and more penetrating, and infinitely louder rolled out from the woods behind them. Both men took an involuntary step back into the trees and whipped their heads round.

'What the fuck…'

Popu grabbed Glass and thrust the binoculars into his face. 'They are coming.' The remaining four Russian soldiers were heading along the ridge in their direction, guns in front of them. They moved at terrific speed. 'We go. Now!'

Popu shoved Glass up and pushed him along the track back towards the cars. They stumbled in the muddy tyre tracks for ten minutes into an opening in the woodland canopy marked by a pile of weathered granite. As they did so, Popu stopped dead.

'What is it?'

Popu hissed. 'Shhhh!'

Ahead of them, something was moving through the trees. They couldn't see it, but they could hear it, moving slowly and deliberately. Glass could hear his heart and his throat went dry. Slowly, Popu gripped his arm and the two of them moved backwards into the trees until they found a small granite outcrop with an overhang. They pushed themselves into it and tried not to breathe, all the while watching for a movement in the lengthening shadows. All they could hear was the sound of the breeze in the pine trees and the singing of linnets and siskins around them. Suddenly, the Russian soldiers crashed into the clearing. Guns raised, they looked carefully at the ground. One kneeled down at

the point at which Popu and Glass had stopped and he raised his head in their direction. He barked something in Russian that Glass couldn't hear and all four men looked in their direction.

'We've been made…' There was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Popu swore in Romanian.

Before the soldiers had the chance to move towards the two cowering men, it came out of the woods like a malevolent shadow. None of the men even knew it was there until it had glided past them, lifting the nearest man off his feet and literally tearing him in half with hand that were enormous and tipped with claws that glinted in what little light was left. The death-spasms of the fatally injured soldier resulted in him squeezing the trigger of his assault rifle, and bullets ploughed everywhere, pinging off the rocks above Glasses head, biting into trees and cutting one of the dying man's colleagues down in a mist of blood and splintered bone. The remain soldiers turned instantly on the intruder and even at distance, Glass registered the shock on their faces. He was feeling the same.

The creature was at least eight feet tall. It was covered in coarse, silver-grey-coloured hair and stood upright on short, powerful legs. Its arms were long and it had recognisable hands, now red with gore, though the talons tipping each finger reminded Glass of a bird of prey. The neck was short and bullish, and from the back of the neck, there was a sprout of darker fur that looked rougher, like the crest on the back of a hyena. The face was elongated and cruel, the eyes piggy and yellow like sulphur and its jaw seemed to go on forever, full of teeth two inches long. The soldiers and the creature circled each other for what seemed like an eternity before both men raised their AK-74s and began firing. Without thinking, Glass began taking photographs with the Polaroid camera, the muzzle flashes of the automatic gunfire masking the flashes of the camera as the two terrified soldiers emptied their rifles into the creature.

Glass shifted in his position under the rock and noticed that Popu was gone. He looked up in anguish to see the policeman heading off into the darkening forest. Neither the soldiers or the creature noticed. Glass could have done the same, but the sight in front of his eyes seemed to rob him of his ability to run. He was utterly ter-

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rified.

The creature must have taken 30 rounds, yet still it stood there, splattered with gore but seemingly uninjured. Both soldiers stood open-mouthed, not really accepting the truth their eyes were telling them. The creature blinked for a second then snarled and finally bellowed at the two men, leaping through the air like a cat and landing on the taller of the two, tearing frantically at him. The prostrate soldier struggled briefly then stopped, save for the spasmodic jerking of his limbs. The second man was fumbling with the catch on his rifle as the creature stared up at him and slowly stood. It snarled and thrust forward a clawed arm, opening the final soldier from throat to groin. The man stood upright for a second, staring down and the enormous wound opening up through the front of his uniform. He sagged for an instant and the beast caught him in its jaws and dragged its prize out of vision. Glass slowly eased himself from under the rock overhang and turned the flash off on his camera. The creature was stood on the pile of rocks in the centre of the clearing and dug its nuzzle into the open cavity of the soldiers belly, pulling out loops of intestine. Glass crept slowly through the trees and stopped once to look back at the monster in the woods now silhouetted against the darkening evening sky. It drew itself to its fullest height and let out a howl that rolled round the mountains like thunder and reached into Glass and gripped his bones. Somewhere distant, the call was answered by another. Glass couldn't help himself. He turned and ran.

The cars were only a hundred yards down the track and Glass saw that one had gone.

'Popu…' he hissed. He ran to the second vehicle and was relieved to find it open. There were no keys, but he smashed the steering column, found the ignition wires and hot-wired it. Slamming the doors shut he locked them and turned the lights on, half expecting to see the Creature stood feet away, snarling at his intrusion into its territory. It wasn't there. He stuck the VW into reverse and drove like a man possessed, stopping only when the road moved out of the woods and the broad river valley spread out in front of him. Forcing his foot off the accelerator, he pulled over

and looked at his shaking hands. He took the polaroids from his pocket and examined them with staring eyes. One was useless, a picture of motion, but the other three were clear and terrible.

Glass shook his head as he examined the pictures, his mind not accepting what he'd seen, his tongue not wanting to say the words out loud, and yet he had seen it, and he knew it was real.

'Werewolf…it's a werewolf'

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Glass got back to the embassy in Bucharest just after eight in the evening. In the process of driving back from the Rucar Forest, he'd broken the speed limit almost the entire distance and flashed his diplomatic licences (and a $5 dollar bill) at one particularly burly and unpleasant policeman. The VW he was driving was designed for neither comfort nor speed, so the trip back down the narrow mountain pass between the forest and the broad expanse of the plain below was not something he was keen to repeat, nor think about. Still, better he get a dressing down from the Consular Officials than spend a night in the back of beyond with what he'd seen.

He parked the car in the garage and walked straight into the foyer, into the lift, onto the third floor, past the UK Trade Delegation offices and into the bar.

'Whisky.'

Nichol, the bar manager drew him a small one.

'Keep going.' It became a large one, then a gentleman's measure, then a tranquiliser. Glass downed it in two long pulls, the fire slipping down his throat quenching the panic he'd been experiencing since sprinting for the car several hours earlier. He looked at his hands. Though the shaking had subsided to a mild tremor, he could still detect the quiver through the liquid sloshing in his now almost empty glass.

'Another?' Nichol was looking concerned.

'Just a small one.' A quick tilt of the head and that was gone too. He offered the barman a watery smile and threw a couple of

pound notes on the bar. 'Thanks Nichol. Has Anna been in?'

'She was in earlier, looking for you I think.'

'If she comes back, tell her I'll see her tomorrow.'

The MI6 office had a whole floor on the Embassy. Officially it was part of the UK Trade Delegation, but not even the *Securitate* believed that. Glass walked through the main offices, by this time largely empty, through a door with a keypad lock and into the office of Robert Jacoby, the official MI6 quartermaster. He was still at his desk.

'Good God David, doesn't anyone knock anymore?' He was a short man, with bright blue eyes and a shock of blonde hair.

'I need a gun.'

Robert rolled his eyes.

'Of course, we hand them out like sweets here. You know the rules, without the appropriate written authorisation from the section head, I can't give you an elastic band and a paper clip.'

Glass picked up Jacoby's phone and pressed three numbers.

'Sir Robert. I'll hold.' There was a brief pause and Jacoby rolled back in his chair and looked at his watch. Glass kept looking out of the window at the darkening evening sky.

'Sir Robert? David Glass. Remember the issue we discussed a couple of days ago? I've reconnoitred the situation. If I'm to complete the task, I need the co-operation of the MI6 quartermaster, and I don't have time for the forms.' Jacoby had been through this game before. Protocol always demanded that every gun, every bullet be accounted for, which was why it came as such a shock when Glass handed him the phone.

'He wants to talk to you.'

Jacoby lifted the phone gingerly. 'Sir, Glass is required…'

'Give him whatever he needs' Sir Robert sounded tired and angry.

'But protocol demands…'

'Give him whatever he needs now, Mr Jacoby. The paperwork will be with you tomorrow.' With that, he rang off. Jacoby looked at the phone, then at Glass.

'O.K. Follow me.' They both walked into a small room

attached to Jacoby's office. Along three of the walls were locked steel cabinets and in front of them was a long workbench with a logbook on it. Jacoby opened it.

'Glass, Glass, Glass. Ahhh, here we are.' He walked to the first cabinet and pulled a key from a particularly well-populated key chain, opened the cabinet and took out a pistol. 'Here you go, your weapon of choice.' It was the Glock 17, a plastic 9mm weapon. It looked like a toy and having seen what little impression assault rifles had had on the creature in the woods, the idea of waving it in the snarling face of an eight foot wolfman would have been vaguely funny if it wasn't a real possibility that he'd actually have to do it.

'This time I'll need something a bit bigger.'

Jacoby raised an eyebrow. 'O.K.' He put the Glock away and brought out a revolver, half as big again as the dainty 9mm automatic. 'Colt Anaconda .44 with the six inch barrel. Designed for the .44 magnum round. This'll go through a brick wall, plus it'll make you feel like Dirty Harry.'

Again, Glass didn't pick it up.

'I was thinking of something in the rifle style.' Jacoby eyed him carefully.

'We only issue those on the OK from London.'

'We can go back and call Sir Robert again if you like, though I'm not sure how happy he'd be…'

Jacoby admitted defeat.

'Fine, fine.' Mumbling under his breath he put the revolver away, locked the cabinet and opened the second one. There were a range of rifles and shotguns locked in their braces. 'Bolt action or auto?'

'Bolt action, with a 'scope.'

Jacoby hoisted out a huge bolt-action rifle with a bipod connected to the barrel counterweight.

'This is the Parker-Hale M85. Takes a .308 round and is accurate out to about 1500 feet. It can be fitted with a night 'scope and a flash suppressor if you wish, but the flash suppressor drops the effective range to about 1200 feet. It has a floating barrel, so don't

jam anything in the stock and the scope will need readjustment every time you take it apart. It also has a silent bolt breech lock and ejects to the right, but as you‘re not a southpaw, it‘s no problem for you.’

Glass looked at it without knowing if it was likely to be anymore effective than the Glock, or bad language. It was big though, which made him feel slightly better.

‘That’ll do nicely. Does it come in a box?’

‘I’ll disassemble it for you. Have you fired one of these before?’

‘Not for a long while.’

Jacoby began to strip the rifle down and put parts into a metal briefcase. ‘It kicks like an angry donkey and even with the silencer on, sounds like someone dropping a house. If you want something quieter, or the person you’re shooting at isn’t sat in a tank, I’d recommend a smaller calibre - say a .223’

Glass smiled. ‘No thanks, Rob. This’ll do.’

Jacoby shrugged.

‘O.K. What about ammo? We’ve got copper-jacketed lead, Steel-jacketed hollow-points for when you want to make a mess, tungsten carbide for shooting through armour-plating, Tungsten-coated liquid Teflon for going in as a .307 and coming out as a .50….’

Glass looked him straight in the eye.

‘You got anything in silver?’

Jacoby didn’t miss a beat.

‘Going hunting, eh? You do know that this armoury is supposed to be used for operational purposes only.’ He grinned. ‘Hell, what do I care, the boss says take what you like, so take what you like.’

He fumbled around in the gun cabinet for a while and came out with a box of ammunition.

‘Here you go.’

Glass was astonished.

‘You keep a stock of silver bullets? Were you a boy scout?’

‘Huh?’

'Prepared for anything.'

Jackoby thought for a second and shrugged whilst Glass opened the box. The rounds inside were normal copper jacketed bullets with a hollow-point tip of silver at the end.

'Bit light on precious metal, aren't they?'

'Silver's a soft metal - breaks up on impact and transfers almost all its kinetic energy to the tissue around the gunshot wound, pretty much guaranteed one shot stop, which is why it's used for big game. If you're not making jewellery or hunting werewolves, what do you care?'

Jacoby looked at Glass, who's expression didn't change one iota.

'Don't tell me you're making jewellery!'

Glass took the three polaroids he'd managed to snatch in the mountains and put them on the table. Jacoby examined them, one by one. Then he placed them down carefully on the table and stared at them for a while.

'What is this - It's too late in the evening to play Wise to your Morecambe.'

'I'm not joking. Do you think Sir Robert has a sense of humour?'

Jacoby continued to stare at the photographs on the table. They were well enough exposed and shot to be identifiable.

'I'll…erm..I've got the necessary equipment to…erm…make you some silver bullets…I mean, proper silver bullets.' He looked up at Glass. 'This is for real?'

'Running around in the mountains an hour from here real. They need to be dead before the Soviets get hold of them.'

Jacoby rubbed his eyes.

'Well, I've seen it all, now.' His mind, in order to avoid processing the new and disturbing information with which Glass had just furnished him, went back to business. 'Pure silver bullets won't penetrate thick clothing, nor will they go through thick hide at a distance much beyond 150 metres, and I guess that you'd want to stay a bit further away than that.'

Glass nodded enthusiastically.

'Fine, then I'm thinking a Glaser safety round, but with silver instead of lead pellets and silver nitrate surrounded by Teflon and tipped with tungsten steel.'

Glass looked at him again.

'In English?'

'A Glazer safety round is a hollow bullet. The traditional ones are usually made of a copper outer lining with a hollow-point that disintegrates on contact. Inside the copper is a layer of Teflon which expands with the heat of the friction as the bullet travels through the air, split's the copper case and strips it off, like a sabot round in a tank.' He looked hopefully at Glass who just stared at him. 'Inside the Teflon are about twenty tiny metal ball-bearings, usually made of steel or tungsten, they transfer the kinetic energy of the bullet from the area around where the outer casing strikes to a much bigger area of tissue, though bullet penetration is not as deep. The shock and tissue damage effects are massive. If I modify your round so that it contains silver bearings and a tiny shot of silver nitrate and mercury, but leave the copper and Teflon jacket, it'll still penetrate the hide of whatever the fuck you just showed me, but you'll still get the effect of silver.' He stopped for a second. 'Jesus, I can't believe we're having this conversation.'

Glass took the cased rifle.

'Sounds fine - you're the expert. When will they be ready?' Now it was Jacoby's chance to shrug.

'I've got to find some silver first, then make the moulds for the ball-bearings, then cast the copper and Teflon jacket. I can have 40 rounds for you in 12 hours.'

'See you then.'

Glass was out of the door before Jacoby could acknowledge him. The quartermaster stared round the gun locker and back down at the rejected silver-tipped hunting rounds.

'Well, that was unexpected.' he sighed, to no-one in particular.

***

Glass stopped by the Embassy library on his way to his quar-

ters and, to his astonishment, there was a book about Eastern European legends and folklore with a long chapter on werewolves. He checked the book out and walked back to his rooms, poured himself a cup of coffee and checked the answer phone on the night-stand next to his bed, which was blinking.

'Message for David Glass.' the mechanical voice intoned, telling David that the caller was external. He was relieved to hear Popu's thick deep voice on the other end. The voice was slurred, suggesting that Popu hadn't stopped at one or two nerve-calmers when he got home.

'David, I call to see you are alive. Leave message for me under name Callis at 0123-432-632 if you OK.' There was a pause for a long time and David moved towards the phone, but the voice cut in again. 'What is it you say? Fucking crazy no?' With the last expletive, the message cut out. David picked up the telephone and dialled the number. It was an answer phone like his own, only the message was distorted and in Romanian. In his own phoney French accent, David spoke slowly and loudly into the mouthpiece.

'This is Dr Callis with a message for Chief Investigator Popu. I have information on his case in Ruar from my colleagues at Geneva. I will visit the police station in the morning at 10:00 am. Good Night.'

He then made himself a sandwich and sat on the bed, eating and reading. The book had obviously been written by a 19th century man of leisure. The author was given as James Forbes-Robertson and it contained vivid prose on virtually every colourful subject from Romany curses to Middle-eastern Mountain assassin cults, all with the amused condescending attitude that seemed to permeate any Victorian travel guide. The chapter on werewolves was, however something of a revelation to Glass, who was no expert on the subject, but he'd seen sufficient Universal and Hammer flicks to feel that he was no beginner either. He had certain expectations that he hoped that the book would confirm. In the back of his mind was the fact that he'd have to report back to both Hotchkiss and Sir Robert about what had happened earlier that evening and he knew already how it was going to sound, so he at

least wanted to be sure of his facts, and now he didn't even have that luxury.

Forbes-Robertson had collected a lot of folk stories about werewolves from central and northern Romania. Stories of baby-theft, rampaging creatures who stole goats and sheep and the occasional shepherd from the peaks of the Carpathians. There was no mention of full moons or wolf bane, nor of people bitten by werewolves becoming werewolves. Most stories begin with a Romany curse but many were simply unexplained, one day a humble peasant was tending his fields, the next he was a slobbering predator. Two days earlier, Glass would have laughed at the thought of him lying on his bed desperately lapping up information from a book that could at best be described as Victorian whimsy but the vision of that enormous creature, perched on its plinth of boulders with the ruined carcass of the *Spetsnaz* soldier at its feet bellowing across the ravine was still too raw and too real to be subject to anything approaching amusement.

Glass took a pen and paper from his desk and began to write down all the common factors in each of Forbes-Robertson's stories about, what the locals referred to as *lup-om,* Destruction was often by fire, which was an interesting concept, but he found it difficult to envisage circumstance in which he could sneak up on the 10 foot monster with a packet of Swan Vestas. He was therefore relieved to see reference to silver crossbow bolts and essence of silver as weapons and charms against werewolves. At least Jacoby wasn't wasting his time. Glass put the book down and rubbed his eyes. It was almost one in the morning. He set the book down and there was a quiet knock on the door. He shoved the cased rifle under the bed and opened the door. It was Anna.

'Nichol told me you looked like you'd had a bad day.'

'You could say that.'

She walked in and sat on the bed.

'Still having problems sleeping?'

Glass closed the door behind her.

'Don't know yet. I hope so.'

***

Glass walked into Hotchkiss' office just as the Section Head was sitting at his desk for the first time in the day.

'Bloody Hell, Glass, you're keen.'

'I need a few hours to meet with Popu. I might not be able to provide a briefing until this afternoon.'

Hotchkiss looked at Glass and took in his tired, crumpled appearance.

'If it's pertinent, I'll call Sir Robert and let him know. Where are you meeting?'

'Police station initially. My cover's still good.'

Hotchkiss went to the diplomatic pouch and lost interest in the conversation.

'Shall we say 2pm then?' It wasn't really a question. Glass thanked him and walked to the car pool.

Popu was waiting outside the police station by the time Glass had arrived and they walked round the corner to a little coffee shop with stained walls, cheap flowery formica tables and a splintered wooden display case full of sweet pastries in lurid colours. They settled in seats towards the back of the shop. Two burly men in gold chains and cheap sunglasses took position on the street outside. Glass eyed them wearily.

'Don't worry David, they are my people.' Popu sipped at his thick, black coffee. 'They hate Russians.'

They drank in silence for nearly five minutes, both men looking and feeling drained and old. Finally Glass looked at the fat policeman.

'You saw it?'

Popu nodded slowly.

'I cannot believe it, but I saw it.' He looked down. 'I ran. I am sorry.'

Glass cracked a small smile.

'I was too scared to run.' They both chuckled. 'It killed some Russian soldiers. That means trouble.'

Popu drew closer, tugging his chair up to the table.

'No, they are happy. They caught one.' Glass stared at Popu. He nodded slowly. 'The one we saw, it was, how you say, howling at another one? They caught the other one.'

'How do you know?' Popu touched the side of his nose and smiled a conspiratorial smile.

'I still have friends. They took it to the medical building of the Bucharest University. They removed all the students and Romanians.' He wrinkled his nose in disgust. 'Fucking Russians, why would they do that?' Glass already knew, and the horror was written all over his face.

'Can you take me there?' Popu shrugged.

'Of course. I can't get you inside, but we can listen into what they are saying.' Glass looked confused and Popu laughed. 'Universities are full of counter-revolutionaries, we keep it bugged.' Glass could have hugged the big man.

'God bless your paranoid hide, Florin.'

'We go now?' Glass shook his head.

'Not yet. We need to prepare and I need to brief my superiors in London.' Popu nodded.

'I too must report. My people do not like Russians taking over our buildings. We must know what they are doing.' It was at that point that Glass realised from just how high up Popu was getting his orders.

'Florin, your Government are helping us. Why?'

He shrugged.

'We do not trust you, but we trust the Russians less.'

***

It was 2pm, and Glass sat in Hotchkiss' office with his file on his knee. He had a bottle of coca-cola on the desk next to him as Hotchkiss' secretary attempted to connect the encrypted line to MI6 headquarters. She finally gave the affirmative and Sir Robert's voice floated across the air.

'Hotchkiss, are you there?'

'Yes Sir. I also have Glass here.'

'Excellent. What's happened?'

Glass coughed then regaled the events of the previous evening, leaving out no detail no matter how absurd. He finally hesitated and stopped when he saw the scale of disbelief on Hotchkiss' face. When Glass finally stammered to a halt, Hotchkiss exploded.

'Do you seriously expect us to believe this adolescent nonsense? We've placed a hugely important asset, a hugely vulnerable asset, in your care and this is how you waste it? Werewolves …' He laughed derisively '…What's next? Vampires in the Politburo?'

His rant was cut short by Sir Robert.

'Oh for Christ's sake, Hotchkiss, spare me your indignation and just listen to the man.' He addressed Glass. 'You don't have any photographic evidence, I suppose?'

'Yes sir, though they're not that good.' He fumbled the polaroids from the file and placed them on the desk and Hotchkiss scowled at them.

'Good Man!' Sir Robert could scarcely disguise his excitement. 'Have them telexed to me immediately. Hotchkiss will see to it.'

The Section head interjected.

'Sir, you can't possibly buy this rubbish?'

Sir Robert sighed.

'It's a strange world out there, Mr Hotchkiss. You'd do well to retain an open mind.' Hotchkiss stared incredulously at the telephone and even Glass was surprised at the easy ride he was getting from Sir Robert. 'What did Popu tell you this morning?'

'The Russians caught one. They have it at the medical centre of Bucharest University. Put the local noses right out of joint. Popu has the place wired, and we're going to stake the place out tonight. Krasov is still involved.'

There was a brooding silence.

'Find out what you can - we need confirmation of what I suspect you already know. If it turns out these suspicions are correct, eliminate the threat. Use any and all means necessary . Do you understand?'

'Yes Sir.'

'Do you need anything?'

'I have a list of things that will assist.'

Sir Robert coughed.

'Hotchkiss? Make sure Mr Glass has your fullest co-operation. His task is your Office's single and over-riding priority. People, equipment, anything he needs, is that clear?'

Hotchkiss snatched the paper list from Glass and glared at the man, who returned the stare steady and calculating.

'Yes Sir.' He hissed.

'Glass, how long to plan?'

'Popu and I are staking the medical campus out tonight. I'll decide when we move on the basis of what we find out.'

'Very well. Report to me when you know. Be careful and remember, this must end. Your cover, the Section in Romania, Popu, they are all secondary considerations. Now, if you'd give Mr Hotchkiss and me a couple of minutes….'

Glass could hear Sir Robert yelling at the Section Head as he walked down the corridor.

***

It was dusk by the time Popu and Glass arrived outside the campus buildings. They left the car several hundred yards away to avoid suspicion and they passed dozens of *Securitate* officers as they walked down University Road, all of whom nodded or smiled nasty, petty smiles as they walked past. They ducked into thick scrub before reaching the campus proper and edged their way around the outside of the campus until they were as close to the medical buildings as they dared to get. Soviet soldiers patrolled outside the building, although they were few and stretched too thinly to provide an effective and defendable perimeter. Even through the half-light and at some distance, Glass could see the maroon beret and shoulder flashes that identified the man as *Spetsnaz*.

They found a small open patch in the thorny scrub and sat down. It was a breezy evening and the wind helped them, blowing

across the low concrete campus towards them, carry the chatter of the soldiers several hundred yards distant, whilst carrying their husky whispers and Popu's cigarette smoke far away from their adversaries. Glass put down his bags. The briefcase stayed shut, but the other bag contained a radio receiver, batteries, a frequency modulator and two pairs of headphones. He handed a pair to Popu.

'Will we pick up your bugs from here?'

He nodded. 'We have thirty bugs in different rooms. They broadcast on a different band. We are close enough.' He stubbed out the cigarette on the sole of his shoe as Glass turned the equipment on.

They scrolled through frequencies, picking up casual conversation, whirring machinery, the noise of screeching monkeys and whining dogs, but no-one who sounded like Krasov, with his nasal whine. What they did find was the sound of someone sobbing. Glass hesitated and they listened in silence. There was no other sound for a couple of minutes and Glass reached for the dial when they heard the sound of a door swing open and the sound of many walking feet on a hard concrete floor. Then they heard the unmistakable voice.

'This is it, Comrades.'

'Is this your idea of a joke, Comrade Colonel?' The voice was deep and elderly. Glass shifted on his haunches.

'Not at all Yevgeny. Does this look like a joke to you.?' There was a short period of silence and Glass was infuriated that he couldn't see what was going on.

'These photographs are real?'

'Real enough for the subject to have killed some of our elite soldiers. One, a mature male, escaped us, but we were able to capture this juvenile.'

'But Pavel, it's just a local peasant boy.'

Krasov sighed.

'Now, perhaps, but not always. This is what we have sought for nearly a decade. A live werewolf, Comrades.'

'How do we know he is what you say he is?' It was a new voice.

'I can't make it transform, Ivan. If I knew what the trigger was, I would have been content with the corpses we recovered in Georgia and Armenia and I wouldn't have had to sacrifice soldiers in the mountains of this god-forsaken country.' Glass felt Popu bristle at the insult. 'We can determine that better in Moscow.'

The elderly voice spoke again.

'How is he to be transported?'

'He will be sedated and caged tonight. An army transport plane will arrive tomorrow afternoon. We will fly back to Moscow tomorrow night and the tests will begin in a few days.' They began to walk towards the door and it was difficult to make out what they were talking about, though Glass caught one last sentence. 'We won't have to worry about the Cerberus Project for much longer.'

They cycled through the bands of the radio receiver for five minutes but heard nothing of value. Popu's radio crackled into life. He listened for a second and muted it.

'I have an observer on a rooftop of a tower on the other side of the campus. He informs me that Krasov is leaving the building and getting into a car.'

'Is he alone?'

Popu barked into the radio.

'Only with a driver.' Glass thought back to what Sir Robert had said to him about his objective and how everything else was secondary. The words Cerberus Project ran round his head like a toy train on a loop of track.

'Have your men stop his car. Get them to check his papers and tell him that they are not in order. Do you have a quiet place where he can be taken without arousing suspicion?' Popu nodded slowly, his eyes sharp and a scowl fixed to his face. 'Take him there and separate him from his driver.'

'He is a high rank in the Soviet Army, we hate Russians but we do not want them angry.'

'Don't worry, Florin, no-one will trace this back to you - I'll be talking to him.'

He still wasn't certain.

'Your cover will be lost.'

'I know. But it must be done. Something terrible is being planned here, and I need to know what it is. I need Krasov stopped and a place to talk with him.' Glass smiled. 'You release him, tell him I was a spy and that I've been apprehended and you come out of this a hero and I get what I need.'

Popu showed no sign of being convinced by Glass's argument but he barked the orders anyway.

'Come. I will take you to where he will be taken.'

***

Popu drove Glass through the centre of Bucharest past night-clubs, bars, pawn shops and gaming clubs. They drove over the river and through the rear of the huge Skoda factory with its enormous sheet steel and asbestos construction sheds and sodium lights that turned the murky, sooty night into a haze of dull daylight. Eventually, in the middle of what was an industrial wasteland of scrap metal yards, chemical storage tanks and coke piles, they pulled up outside a small office complex. Two men in the now familiar *Securitate* uniform of cheap leather coats, roll-neck sweaters, gold jewellery and cruel eyes stood outside. They stepped aside for Popu, who lead Glass into a room near the foot of a flight of stairs. The room was bare breeze block with filthy windows and a table and three chairs sat in the middle. Glass dumped his bags down and sat in the least decrepit of the chairs. Popu walked over to a cabinet and took out a bottle of burgundy coloured liquor and two glasses. He placed them on the table and poured two glasses full.

'Tuica - Plum vodka. Drink.'

Glass smiled and shook his head.

'Not tonight Florin.' It was the older Romanian's turn to smile.

'Have you ever tortured anyone before?' Glass looked shocked.

'What? No, of course not.'

'Then you will need drink.' He shoved it towards Glass who stared at it, unblinking. Popu leaned over and placed a hand on

Glass's shoulder.

'I like you, David. You see, but don't comment. You don't, how you say, look down your nose at me. You are a good man, but you are no secret policeman. Krasov will tell you nothing. He is Red Army, he fears his own side more than he fears you. If you need him to talk, you will have to hurt him or threaten to.'

Glass took the drink and knocked it back in one. It was sweet going down, like a brandy, but hit his belly like a firecracker. He pushed the glass forward and Popu refilled it.

'Men like us do what we have to do. It does not mean we must enjoy it, or enjoy what it does to us. We are all cruel men, and cruel men begat cruel actions.' Glass knocked back the second drink and stood up. 'He is upstairs - the room at the end of the hall.'

Glass walked up the stairs and to the end of the hall. A *Securitate* officer was stood outside and he flashed Glass a smile that made him feel queasy. He didn't acknowledge it, nor did he pause for fear of losing his nerve.

Krasov was handcuffed to a chair and was very unhappy. He started jabbering in Russian at such speed that Glass had trouble understanding, then he recognised the MI6 man and stopped, the colour draining from his face and he began to pull at the handcuffs with more urgency. There was nothing in the room except for the chair Krasov was sat in, a second plastic chair pushed against a wall, a sink and a plug socket. Krasov's chair was bolted to the floor. Glass looked round the filthy dark-stained walls and the faint disorientation of nausea returned to him. He picked up the chair against the wall and placed it in front of Krasov and sat down.

'As you've guessed by now, Colonel Krasov - do you prefer Colonel or Doctor, by the way?'

The Russian had recovered a degree of composure.

'I am a soldier first.' He spoke slowly and with a brittle accent, but in excellent English.

'…then Colonel it is. As you have guessed by now, my name isn't Callis and I am not Swiss. Who I am is not your concern. What I want is very much your concern.'

'I am a Colonel in the Soviet Army. I demand to see the Soviet

mission to this backward cesspool!'

Glass leaned into the bellicose Russian.

'I'd be very careful about insulting Romania. The people here are proud of their country, even if they do have pretty short tempers.' He sat back. 'You have a man in custody at the medical annex of Bucharest University. Why?'

'I don't have to answer these questions.'

Glass took a small leather wallet from his inside coat pocket and untied the leather bindings. It rolled open to reveal two syringes, an array of needles, some sterile swabs and two ampules of a liquid that looked like weakly diluted orange squash.

'This is Thiopental. Truth serum is a bit strong, it's more like a fast-acting barbiturate - but you're the doctor. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Tell me what I need to know.'

Krasov stared at the ampules.

'You can drug me and break my fingers, but I will not talk.'

Glass stood up and fixed the needle to the syringe.

'OK. I won't break your fingers, no stomach for that sort of thing. My Romanian colleague outside, the one who arrested you…I'm not sure about him. What do you think?' Glass began walking towards the door.

'Wait!' Krasov was staring at the syringe, his eyes wide. Glass stopped and tried not to let the relief seeping through him show. 'I think you know what he is.'

'I didn't ask you what he was. I've seen what he is, or something like him. What I asked you was why.'

Glass put the wallet in the sink and Krasov relaxed just a little.

'He is a werewolf, but then you have guessed that. We wanted him so that we could carry out some tests on him and understand what it is that triggers the metamorphosis.'

Glass sat down again.

You are a military biologist. Are you building some kind of biological weapon? Is that what the Cerberus Project is?'

Krasov looked astonished.

'We are not looking for a weapon. We are looking for a vac-

cine.'

Glass stared at the Russian.

'What? The Cerberus project is a vaccine? How many of these things are roaming around Russia?'

Krasov rolled back in his chair and smiled for the first time.

'Which agency do you work for? They really should send their agents in the field better briefed.' Glass flushed red. 'Are you British?' he didn't wait for an answer. 'Ask your superior!'

'Wait.' Glass was confused. 'Project Cerberus is ours?'

'Yes, Cerberus is one of yours. It seems there was an incident in Yorkshire in the 1970's. A couple of American hitch-hikers were savaged. They died. I believe there was a film version released this year. Largely fiction of course. The creature that attacked those men was caught. It was sent to Porton Down, where it was subjected to some interesting experiments. A remarkable amount was learned about them. Nobel Prize winning research., though of course it wasn't submitted - it breached the 1972 convention on the production of biological weapons.'

'What did they find?'

'That Lycanthropy is a genetic disorder, like Gaucher's Disease or Diabetes. Your scientists mapped it, an extraordinary accomplishment. Gaucher's Disease affects one in one hundred thousand people, Diabetes affects about one in three hundred. Lycanthropy, in Russia at least, affects about one in five thousand.'

Glass laughed.

'OK have it your way, we go with the needles.'

Krasov was serious.

'Inject me and have the ape outside remove my testicles but you will get the same story. Lycanthropy is a common genetic disorder. If you don't believe me ask your superiors. We have looked for the genetic signpost as part of test screenings and inoculations on children across Russia. We have twenty thousand potential werewolves walking around in Russia today, there are five thousand walking around your country, yet we have found just four recorded cases in the last thirty years. The genetics are common, but the condition is incredibly rare. We don't know why. We took

the boy because we need to know the trigger. Your people are working on it as part of Project Cerberus because if they find it, they can use it as a weapon. We want to find it so we can produce an antidote.'

Glass sat back. He didn't know whether Krasov was telling him a cock-and-bull story or the truth. He had no idea, but then nothing much about the previous three days had made any sense at all. One thing was certain. He could pump Krasov full of drugs and have two heavies come in and take his teeth out with a chisel, but it wasn't likely to result in anything more or less believable than he'd already heard. He stood up , walked to the sink and put the wallet back into his pocket. Krasov looked relieved.

'Thank you Colonel. You will be held for a while longer, then released when I have confirmed your story to my satisfaction.'

Krasov slumped in his chair.

'If you want instant confirmation, ask your MI6 section head about Project Cerberus, and observe his reaction.'

Glass closed the door on the Soviet doctor and walked back down to Popu, who was reading a paper and smoking. He didn't look up when Glass entered and poured himself a drink.

'Are you well?'

Glass threw the drink down.

'Not really.'

Popu put the newspaper down and stubbed out his cigarette.

'Well?'

'The Russians are looking to use the werewolf they have in custody to make an anti-werewolf vaccine, or create a weapon. To be honest I have no idea. I do know one thing though, if they succeed in getting this one out, they'll be back for the other, and any others. You'll never be rid of them.'

'So what do we do?'

Glass sat down and bummed one of Popu's cigarettes. It tasted rough.

'I've been told to prevent the Russians getting that creature out of the country by all means necessary. If your people can hold Krasov for another 12 hours, my cover will still be good but to be

honest, I'm not sure it'll get us in that medical building.'

'There is also another one in the woods, do not forget.' He sounded miles away. 'Werewolves as weapons, and they come here for them…' He stood up. 'I must telephone my superiors about this.'

Glass dug a Polaroid of the werewolf from his jacket pocket and handed it to Popu.

'This might help.' The Romanian nodded, threw Glass his cigarettes and left the room.

He was gone nearly ten minutes, and Glass began to wonder whether he'd gone upstairs to assure himself that Krasov had shared everything with Glass. Eventually, however, he returned, picked up the glass and the bottle and poured himself a huge shot of Tuica and downed it.

'It has been decided. We will deal with the creature held in the University , but you must find the other.'

Glass stared at the obviously uncomfortable Romanian.

'How will you deal with it?'

That is not your concern. We will not be the testing ground for Russian scientists and their damned weapons. You must find the other and kill it. I will take you back to the Embassy.'

***

Popu dropped Glass back at the Embassy and drove on to the Romanian central military district headquarters, where a man in the light blue dress uniform of the Romanian air force was waiting. He got in and silently they drove across the city to the University campus. By the time they got to the outskirts of the university it was gone 10pm, and the moon had risen high in the night sky. Clouds raced across it's bright surface and to the west, late summer Thunderheads towered over the Black Sea coast, creeping across the sky like thick treacle.

As soon as Popu parked up, a *Securitate* Officer ran over to the car.

'Florin, something is going on.'

'What is it Kasha?'

'The Russians were guarding the building, sat on their Tartar asses and playing cards, when there was a disturbance inside the building. They all ran in about ten minutes ago and we have heard automatic weapons fire.'

They ran down the street to a tower block overlooking the medical campus. The roof was full of securities officers with binoculars and high-powered rifles.

'How long have they been in?'

'Around 15 minutes, Sir.' Do we go in after them?'

Florin shouted.

'Clear the roof! All men clear the roof and head down to the ground floor.' The *Securitate* did as they were told and when the last one had gone through the sheet steel door, the Air Force officer produced a radio.

'We couldn't have asked for better luck, Florin.' Florin said nothing as the officer switched the Radio on. 'Confirm target is secure. Begin run.'

'Roger confirm. One minute and inbound.' The radio crackled. Both men watched the building through their binoculars. There was the occasional flash of gunfire, but it sporadic and fitful. Florin thought he heard a barking howl from inside the building, but the wind was in the wrong direction and the noise, if he'd heard it, was quickly drowned out by a roar from the sky behind them as a pair of MiG-21 fighters tore over the southern edge of Bucharest.

'15 seconds. Stand by.'

The first MiG appeared over skyline to the south, identifiable in the night sky only by the bright afterglow of its engine. The belly of the jet fighter seemed to blaze into flames and both men watched the trace of the rockets as they bit into the roof of the medical buildings. The explosions were small and kicked the concrete on the roof into dust and fragments, creating large cracks in the structure of the building and a hole, perhaps 30 feet across appeared towards the rear. It's payload delivered, the MiG then shot off to the north. Popu stared at the damage.

'Did he miss?'

The air force officer turned his back on the building.

'Not at all. You might want to turn your back at this point, Florin.'

'10 seconds. Stand by.'

The Second MiG neither of them saw as they were crouched below the lip of the concrete roof of the tower block. If they'd been watching, they'd have seen the delta-winged fighter approach from the same direction as the first. Instead of carrying rockets, this aircraft carried what looked like a barrel with a pointed end under it's belly. It approached slower than the first jet and, as it approached the medical campus, it went into a shallow climb before releasing the barrel, lurching in the air and shooting off to the north. The barrel gracefully arced through the air and landed on the roof, crashing through the hole made by the rockets from the first fighter. For a second, there was silence, then there was a huge explosion that blew out the windows of the medical complex and Popu felt the rush of cold air over his head as the thermite napalm ignited and burned so hot that it vaporised the steel frames of the building, melted the concrete and exhausted all the oxygen available, burning itself out only seconds after igniting. Both men stood up and stared at the huge smouldering pile of rubble.

'I'll have to check the rubble.' Florin spoke but didn't really believe it was necessary.

'Of course, though I'd wait for an hour, the rubble will still be hot enough to melt the flesh off your legs.'

They stared at the smoke for what seemed like ages, until the approaching sirens and the rain, now starting to fall, drove them from the rooftop. 'It's up to you now, David', thought Florin as he descended the stairs of the tower block.

***

Glass requisitioned a pool car from the Embassy car park, and was well on his way north of Bucharest on the gentle climb into the Carpathians when the Romanian Air Force solved 50% of his problem. The drive was something of a crapshoot because in truth Glass

had no idea where they'd stopped last time and as the road closed in on the mountains and the trees began to blot out the pale moonlight, he started to question the sanity of what he was doing.. He drove for about forty minutes until the road disintegrated into a slick, pock-marked track. The forest had completely closed around the track and Glass couldn't believe it could get so dark. He saw a suitable forest road pulling off to the right and parked the Embassy Skoda off the road, turned off the engine and switched off the headlights. Carefully and with some trepidation he wound down the window. The thick, humid air heavily scented with pine and wild cotoneaster flooded into the car and somewhere distant, thunder rumbled away. Otherwise the forest was silent and black.

Glass reached into the back seat and took out the case carrying the rifle and reached for the internal light. It didn't work.

'Fucking great!' Glass hissed as he pulled his zippo from his pocket, lit it and set it on the dash. By the flickering flame of the lighter, he attempted to assemble the rifle, without much success.

'I ask for a gun and Jacoby gives me a bloody airfix kit!' He cursed aloud before finally giving up on the half-constructed rifle and switching on the headlights.

Outside, and hunching over in front of the soda's headlights, Glass finally finished piecing the gun together. He took the special rounds Jacoby had made and looked at them rolling around in his palm. They were snub-nosed and ugly, and externally showed no evidence of containing silver. He didn't even know if silver would work.

'What the hell am I doing out here?' He shouted to the blackness. It replied with a long, ear-splitting bark that finished as a low bellow.

The noise shocked Glass out of his skin, partly because it was unexpected and partly because he knew exactly what it was. He picked the rounds up off the dirt and shoved them into the rifle's stubby magazine, flipped the bolt and chambered the first round. Swinging round, he flipped the low-light telescopic sight on as he noticed something huge at the far edge of the soda's headlight plume heading towards him at breakneck speed.

Glass's nerve failed him and he leapt over the bonnet of the car and around the back. The Werewolf leapt onto the bonnet and the whole thing collapsed, extinguishing the headlights and smashing the windscreen. The light extinguished they were cast into the dark and the werewolf growled a deep rumbling growl whilst it tried to figure out where Glass was.

He was backing slowly towards the forest road and the cover of the pine trees. The night scope cast a sickly green glow, so he'd flipped it off so as not to give his position away to the creature busy sniffing the air. He moved painfully slowly and placed each foot down with infinite care. He heard the creak and squeal of tearing metal behind him which he interpreted as the werewolf stepping off the bonnet of the car. He tried to time short spurts of movement with the increasingly loud peels of thunder, but Glass knew he was at a disadvantage.

He backed against a tree and, deciding it was large enough to offer a degree of protection from at least one side, he winced as he turned the low light scope back on and his face was artificially illuminated by the green glow. He raised the rifle to his shoulder and slowly swept it in a 180 degree arc, trying to locate the moving werewolf. He'd gone round almost the full 180 degrees when he picked it up, slowly creeping along the tree line 120 yards to his left. It was taking its time but was moving with a purpose. It didn't matter, Glass had a bead. He took a breath, held it and depressed the trigger slightly to release the safety and as he did so, a huge flash of lightning flashed across the sky.

The night scope worked by magnifying low light sources, so when it picked up the lightning flash, it magnified it into a sharp, brilliant light. Glass staggered and the shot went wild. From somewhere ahead of him there was a low, angry growl and Glass felt the enormous creature pounding across the open glade in his direction. Glass tugged on the rifle bolt and started firing blind in the direction of the sound of movement. He counted down the bullets as he fired with growing panic as they clearly missed - 6, 5, 4, 3, - he could almost feel the ground shaking beneath his feet as it got close enough to smell. Glass thought clearly and with serenity 'I'm going

to die' when the lightning flashed a second time and Glass caught sight of the creature, only 30 feet away. The flash of lightning tore its way across the sky less than a second, but it gave him enough. He fired twice and received two yelping howls as reward. He closed his eyes and waited for the injured Werewolf to hit him square in the chest, expending it's last breath tearing him to pieces. It never arrived, and after a couple of seconds, he opened an eye. Nothing.

Re-loading the rifle he slowly moved forward along the line of momentum. His right eye still hurt from the malfunctioning night scope and his vision was blurred by the pain and his own pumping adrenaline. Taking the zippo out of his pocket, he struck it on and in the glow of the single flame, he knelt besides the naked body of a middle-aged man lying in the foetus position with two holes in his chest, the edges of which glittered in the light of the flame. Glass poked the body with the rifle and nothing happened, so he slumped next to the body and, as his adrenaline supply failed, he wept.

***

The debrief took place in Sir Robert's cottage in the country. Glass had no idea why, but after the filthy urban landscape of Bucharest, he wasn't sorry. They sat in Sir Robert's garden drinking white wine and Glass gave the older man as thorough a briefing on the events in Romania as he could. Sir Robert never raised an eyebrow and never gave the impression that he disbelieved a word Glass had said. After Glass had finished, he handed Sir Robert a written version of his report, complete with photographs. They sat in silence for a few seconds, before Sir Robert sat forward.

'That was a tough job, David. Not many would have kept their mind together, never mind get the job done.' He took a sip of wine. 'Popu's secret remains safe and we're in the Romanians' good books. Hotchkiss may not like you, but he's got a lot to thank you for.' Glass didn't smile. Sir Robert continued. 'This wasn't a test,

per se, it was a good job well done, but you have proved you can handle unorthodox situations, and we still have a few to deal with. I'd like to make your move permanent, if you're willing?'

Glass sat forward in his chair, and lit a cigarette. Something else to thank Popu for.

'I don't know - I might.'

'How can I convince you?'

'Tell me what Project Cerberus is.'

Sir Robert smiled.

'Krasov spilled did he? It's classified, but I'll give you a taster. The Warsaw Pact has 2 million troops in Europe, we have 750,000. They have 19,000 tanks, we have 12,000. I like our chances a lot more if a decent proportion of those troops and tanks have something urgent to deal with in the Motherland.'

Glass shrugged.

'I don't like biological weapons and I won't help protect them, ours or theirs.'

Sir Robert shrugged.

'It isn't a weapon yet. Like the Russians, we don't know what triggers an episode.' He smiled a thin smile. 'Like I said, it's classified, but I take your point. Principles are rare enough in this game, I'll respect yours.' Glass relaxed.

'Then I accept your offer.'

Sir Robert handed him a file.

'Excellent. Take a week off to recuperate and read that. Obviously, it's classified to your level, but don't flash it around.'

Glass opened it and saw a picture of a cruel-faced old man in a Hawaiian shirt.

'Who's this?'

'That photograph was taken two weeks ago in Ascunsion, Paraguay. The man in the Picture is Josef Mengele.'

Glass stared at Sir Robert.

'You're kidding.'

'I'm afraid not. He has something that makes him uniquely dangerous, and we want you to retrieve it for us.'

Glass looked back at the photograph.

'What is it?'

'Mr Glass, what do you know of the *Black Bible*….?'

***

1995

The aircraft was an RAF transport on a non-stop flight from Bucharest to Prestwick, Glasgow. It touched down in the dead of night and was met by two military transport trucks surrounded by soldiers. They took possession of two large boxes and loaded them quickly and quietly, and headed north through the night and into the dawn. They drove north, through Dundee and Perth, out past the massive ediface of the Cairngorms before cutting west at Inverness and into North-west Scotland. At 11am the pulled up at the head of a wooded glen.

Two men got out in white body suits and began to take samples of the rock.

'This looks perfect'

'Agreed, radon levels are through the roof.'

One of the men banged on the side of the trucks.

'Unload them'.

The soldier lifted the crates out of the trucks and as some spread out, SA 80s at the ready others unlocked them. Blinking in the daylight, a small group of people, confused and frightened stepped out into the open air. They stared at the soldiers and stood together, looking without comprehension at their surroundings.

'Go!' One of the white-suited men gave the shooing motion but the small group of people didn't understand, so one of the soldiers emptied his SA 80 into the air and the group ran in terror, heading for the trees, before disappearing into the greenery.

The soldiers then got back in the truck and they all waited, and waited. Finally, after ten hours, they heard it, rolling around the mountains, distant and clear. One of the men picked up a radio and smiled.

'They're howling. I think we're in business.'

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CROWD SCENE

by James Brough

The chair was too small for John. If he leaned back, the top of it dug into his back about six inches below his shoulder blades and he started to feel as if, were he to lean back, he might overbalance. There were people sitting on the floor in front of his row, two of them in front of his chair. There was a gap between them of a few inches and for a few seconds he luxuriated in the thought that shortly he would stretch each of his legs out in turn into that gap, relieving the cramped feeling building up in his knees.

'… and so if we follow this line of thought to its conclusion, we have to ask where these prejudices come from…'

He sneaked a glance at the clock over to the left. The speaker had been on his feet and in full flow for twenty minutes. He had an hour slot to fill. Say fifteen minutes for questions from the audience, five minutes to clear the venue for the next speaker. So only twenty minutes more of this. Half way. He noticed with displeasure that while his attention had been elsewhere, one of the two people sitting in front of him, a bespectacled man, had shifted position and now took up the precious gap John had been going to move his feet into. He stared moodily at the man. He was tall, wearing gold wire-framed glasses and with dark curly hair. The man had come into the

room late – hence the fact he was sitting on the ground. Grovelling, John thought. You stupid, lumbering oaf. You don't deserve to live. The ability to breathe – it's wasted on you. John drew up his left leg, bringing the knee back towards him. He tensed the muscles in the calf, pointing the toe and feeling the muscles on the edge of cramping. He paused for a moment, the leg drawn up, his foot level with the back of the man's head. He focussed on the man's back, the shoulder blades visible through the back of the shirt, the hair shaved on the back of the head, two lines of fuzz disappearing into his collar. He poised the leg for a moment and addressed a silent question to him. How hard would I have to kick you to knock your head clear off your shoulders? Would you even notice if it was hard enough? If your neck snapped and your head arced down to the floor, landing on the carpet at the speaker's feet? For a moment, he was frozen, one foot off the floor, leg held aloft, thinking that he could do it. There was nothing to stop him. All he had to do was send the message from his brain, down his nerves to the muscles in his leg, to drive the leg forward like a piston, for the heel of his boot to impact on the back of the skull. Would it snap the neck and knock the head to the floor? Or would it just crack the skull like an egg, his boot sinking into the spongy brain. For a moment he felt his leg was frozen, suspended in mid air, out of his control. Then, it jerked forward an inch, before sinking back down, his foot resting once more on the floor. He watched it for a few seconds, but it showed no further sign of movement.

'…and think of the people you have had contact with in your life.' The speaker was still droning. 'Who you sat next to on a train, were served by in a shop, asked for directions. How many thousands of individuals? And you know nothing about them. How many of them have saved a man's life? How many have written a book? Built a house? Killed a man? Chances are, sometime in your life, you have changed a fiver for a man who saved someone's life or sat next to a murderer on a bus.'

John gauged the distance between himself and the speaker. He

concluded that if he made one flying leap over the heads of the row in front of him, he could drive into the speaker on the full, bearing him to the ground. He would have to be quick. How would he do it? The man was wearing a thin cotton tee-shirt, no collar and hanging loose outside his trousers. John thought of his teeth sinking into the man's neck, grinding through the cartilage of his windpipe, his vision fogged by the gush of blood from the artery. Was it the carotid or the jugular? Did it matter? At the same time he could yank up the tee-shirt and claw at the stomach, tearing through the skin and the layer of yellow fat, releasing the viscera beneath. How long would it be before he was dragged off his victim by the audience? A few seconds at most. Some would be frozen by what they saw, but there would be enough to be able to overpower him. He looked round at the others in the audience. Who would attack him? Who would be frozen and who would flee? The tall man in front of him – John was sure he would just sit and gape like a fool, until John turned on him with teeth and nails, gutting him like a fish.

'And in conclusion, I would like to thank you for listening. Are there any questions?'

Responses from the audience were desultory apart from the man at John's feet, who had a series of questions. In ten minutes, the room was emptying, while John was standing next to the speaker.

'Well, thank you for listening,' he said, 'It's always nice to get a chance to talk to a captive audience. I hope I'll get a chance to see you later.'

John smiled broadly at him. 'It was an absolute pleasure,' he said. 'As you say, hope to see you later on.' He turned and headed for the door, whistling as he went.

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PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG WOMAN

by Carole Hall

> 'There is some mystery as to the identity of the dishevelled young woman in 'Portrait of a Young Woman', painted in 1485. Botticelli never revealed the names of his sitters, but she bears a strong resemblance to his Venus in 'Birth of Venus', (1484-6), arising lasciviously from the sea, and also Venus in 'Mars and Venus', (1485-6), where she has apparently managed to exhaust Mars, the god of war.'
>
> *15th Century Painters — Florence and Venice*

Barsini was in agony. How could he investigate these horrible crimes, when the only person he could discuss it with was this beautiful woman - really no more than an innocent child?

Barsini stepped off the boat, took a deep breath, and knocked firmly on the heavy oak door of the palazzo. A choppy wind was blowing in from the sea, and it impudently caught in the folds of his black velvet cloak, making little bulges here and there, insolently flipping the ends of the tassels this way and that. It caught in strands of his light hair and pulled them outside his cap, and

detracted from the serious image he wished to present. The very elements themselves seemed to wish to make sport with him, and he was thus feeling uncomfortable before he even stepped inside the door.

Of course, he had no real belief in the legends of the sea monsters which supposedly existed around these shores. They were said to swim silently into the city at night, often taking the form of a young maiden, to tempt strangers with their beauty. Sometimes this would lead to good fortune, sometimes illness or exhaustion, sometimes death. It depended. He believed these stories were becoming

more prevalent due to the increase in prostitution in certain parts. It had been impossible to tell the difference between fine ladies and street walkers, due to the latters' predilection for donning expensive clothing and jewelry for their work.

It was certain that the two dead men had simply drifted this way on the morning

current, and it was mostly curiosity alone which prompted his visit, all the other leads of the day having proved fruitless.

The door was opened by a neat little maid, and he was shown

into the main room.

This was one of the spectacular rooms be had heard about A large window ran the length of it, with cushions spread opulently on a window ledge, and outside the Venetian scenery passed by with a myriad twinkling coloured lights in the dusk.

The impression was of a certain dark, faded opulence. A musky smell lingered in the room, a rich perfume which was probably used to mask the dampness which was inevitable. The pooling reflections from the water created a strange atmosphere, providing an eerily flickering ambience in which it seemed that the very shadows themselves were moving.

He had been rushing to catch the boat, and was beginning to sweat slightly inside his warm clothing.

A strangely beautiful girl with long dark wavy hair entered the room.

He caught his breath.

Barsini soon realized that, supposedly, the girl was as innocent as she looked.

It was only much later that the rumours about her began to swirl around in his head like a low mist creeping over the water.

There she sat like a frightened deer, soft brown eyes over brimming with tears. Hands churning an elaborate cream lace hanky. An exquisitely beautiful porcelain doll, her fine drawn Italianate looks and helplessness like a magnet to him. He thought she looked like a classic Leonardo drawing, or a Botticelli angel.

Although he could not be sure, sometimes he thought he saw a certain cool

watchfulness behind those glistening eyes. An amused glint.

At that first meeting, although distracted, he managed to ascertain that she knew *nothing* about the murders - in fact was profoundly shocked to hear of them. So close!

A newfound protective instinct towards her began to clash heavily with the well worn grooves of his analytical law enforcement mind.

It was only later that evening, going over the events of the day, that it struck him that *everything* about the palazzo had been

strange. For there had been a young girl, obviously wealthy, yet apparently living alone, and with no visible means of support

It was not just unusual - it was unheard of.

***

The next time Barsini saw her, he firmly resolved to be far more businesslike in his approach. Yet he found this difficult, since the purpose of his visit was to assure her that the murderer had been apprehended, and was behind bars.

She was so grateful, and profuse in her thanks, that Barsini once more found himself falling under her spell. Yet, this time he was not too absent minded to quiz her about her missing family, and drop hints about her means of support.

Although she seemed reluctant to discuss her immediate family (obviously through some trauma), she immediately offered to introduce him to two of her uncles, one of whom was her legal guardian.

Although he was in no doubt that his once clear judgement was becoming more

clouded with every minute that passed, this was enough for Barsini.

He would find out me truth once they were engaged.

***

The uncles turned out to be minor city officials - not in any professional capacity of course, as they were both far too wealthy, but rather as an amusing hobby. They very much enjoyed attending the many official dinners and banquets that went with the job.

They both found it hilariously funny that Barsini should have met Violetta, their niece, while investigating a murder, and never failed to mention it when introducing him to their many social contacts.

Barsini found himself enjoying life as never before - in fact he existed in a sparkling whirl of happiness, only slightly marred on

occasion by lingering doubts about the innocence of his beloved.

He was aware that, somewhere deep inside, there was an instinctual question mark about those murders. Too many people (criminals, admittedly) had been found dead along that stretch of water. He could not begin to explain exactly in what capacity he thought that she was implicated (perhaps it was her family?). But these doubts lay heavy, like a small black stone in his heart, always ready to drag him under and drown him in sorrow.

***

He had turned up unexpectedly. The maid let him in, surprised to see him, as she knew her employer to be absent.

The beautiful girl with the long-wavy hair had been Barsini's fiancee for months now.

Yet he still knew so little about her. He insisted that the maid show him down to the cellar so that he could locate two bottles of her favourite wine.

He was sweating profusely as he followed the maid down the narrow steps. The

bobbing candlelight created fantastic shadows on the moss encrusted walls.

At the first level, the maid opened the wooden door of the wine cellar with her key, handed over one set of candles, then gingerly made her way up the rough steps again. He knew she did not like coming down here. He was sorry he had made her.

The steps leading down past the cellar door were damp and slippery. They had strange black and maroon stains on them, presumably from some metal in the water.

They could not be blood.

Barsini could hear strange splashings and heavings from down below. No doubt the effect of the waves beating against the walls.

He hesitated there by the door, not knowing whether to go back, collect the wine, or continue on past the door down to the second level. Why had he come here? The murders had been solved. His beloved had never really been a suspect. He knew that.

The murderer had been convicted and hanged.

He wanted nothing more than to trust her completely. Why could he not do this?

Why? He felt like beating his head against the wall. He knew he should go back and forget all about this.

Instead, he slowly began to descend the steps.

***

Barsini hung on pathetically to the spindly iron hand rail as he descended the steps.

There below he could see the water, glinting in the darkness. What did he expect to see?

As he got closer and closer, his nostrils began to be assailed by that strange musky odour. It was very strong here. Was it only because of the dampness?

With beating heart, Barsini realized that he did not really want to be here. Why could he not trust? But he just wished to resolve this tiny lingering suspicion in his mind – once and for all. Just to satisfy himself, (this once, and once only) that his fiancee was truly the innocent girl she appeared to be. To have an end to it.

He supposed this inability to accept people at face value was due to his job — or was it just his nature? It had always served him well enough.

The water was slapping against the stones energetically, and for a while Barsini kept his eyes glued to its surface. But there was nothing. Slowly he began to feel more and more foolish. After all, what had he really expected to see? A vital piece of missing evidence? A monster? The whole thing was quite ridiculous! He started to laugh at himself.

Suddenly lighthearted, he turned to go. Then he saw something.

A single long wavy hair floating on the surface. He carefully picked it up and

wrapped it in his handkerchief. His fiancee had told him that she never came down here.

Or had she just come down to get some wine?

As Barsini ascended the steps, he realised, that far from receding, his suspicions of his fiancee were likely to spin out into infinity. He reflected that this was probably due to some dark and impenetrable core of her - actually the very thing that attracted him to her. It was in his nature to endlessly analyze and probe a mystery until it was solved.

This is what made him so good at his job.

As long as he was with her, (even if it was three lifetimes) he knew he would be

plagued by these terrible suspicions - he wished to trust, yet could not bring himself to trust *her.*

He had also made certain enquiries and found that indeed she was related by blood to one of the most powerful (and villainous) families in Venice. He was almost certain that she despised them as

much as he did. Nevertheless, if he married her, his life would not be worth living.

He decided that some mysteries were better left alone — leave the darkness to itself.

The next morning be would pack his meagre possessions into a travelling bag, and leave Venice for the mainland, never to return.

The very instant he decided this, he felt a cold hand, like death itself, reach out and grab him. It encircled his leg with a grip like cool water and iron.

A few scant seconds while he held onto the handrail, only pulling it further from the wall - until he was dragged cleanly under the water, which closed over him as though nothing had occurred. Yet his blood leaped out in a graceful fountain to join the blood of those others on the steps, painting a pretty filigree, like wine red moss on the walls.

In his very last moments, his analytical mind flailed around frantically, trying to find some logical explanation for this disaster.

Wasn't there something his mother had said.....years ago?

Ah yes! Yes! About loyalty. Never speak or think ill of those you love.

And the two creatures who most value this quality?

Pretty maidens - and sea monsters.

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THE OXFORD VAMPIRE

by Thirteen Ravens

His Saturday night to Sunday morning shift was almost over. The first of a row of nine 'til fives he had to work that week. Nine pm 'til five am, that is.

As Constable Ben Lawrence turned his patrol car onto the dark and almost deserted stretch of the Oxford ring road, his radio crackled in to life. It was the control room reporting another incident.

'Reports of male intruder on tenth floor balcony, flat forty, Hollingwood. Possible B&E. Distressed female alone in residence, over.'

PC Lawrence let out a small sigh and keyed up. They were short on officers for tonight's shift, so this would have to be him.

'Roger that Alpha Foxtrot, will attend immediately.'

His night was almost over – after this possible break and entry, then.

A balcony on the tenth floor, though. PC Lawrence frowned. Either the woman was paranoid, a neighbour was trying to scare her, or it was a bloody student Spiderman wannabe with a few pints inside of him.

As he neared the block of flats he switched off all the car lights and bumped quietly up on the kerb. If there was some prat climbing around up there he wanted to get a good look at him first.

Getting out of the car he peered up at the bleak concrete rectangle towering up into the night sky, his breath pluming white into the winter air. Apart from a few pieces of washing flapping about on one of the left-hand balconies everything was dark and still.

The intercom system to the flat was cracked and badly scratched yet was still lit up; he was half surprised that it still worked. He pressed the buzzer for number forty and waited. After about five seconds a woman's voice crackled through.

'Yes?'

She sounded pretty shaken.

'PC Lawrence, Madam. May I come up?'

The buzzer sounded on the door. That was obviously a yes, then.

The lift stank of urine and other unpleasant smells. The foyer to the five flats on the tenth floor did as well. PC Lawrence had lived in a high-rise when he was younger, this exact same high-rise, in fact; when he was a new officer fresh out of training. But it hadn't stunk like this back then.

Things had got an awful lot worse for the Hollingwood residents in the last twenty years. The crime was bad now, the housing poor and as a result the residents' morale was unsurprisingly low. As the local area beat officer he felt a strong responsibility for the place, though he was glad he moved out when he did. All the new rules and governmental regulations about what he could, and couldn't do when arresting criminals ensured his job was becoming steadily more difficult and frustrating. In certain instances he felt his hands were tied. Each arrest meant hours of paperwork now, and in many cases the criminal was let out on bail. Due to this some of the local troublemakers now thought themselves nigh untouchable.

He strode to the end of the corridor to find the door to flat forty slightly ajar. The strip light directly above him flickered on and off, flashing its sickly yellow glow on the dirty walls. In the silence of the early morning PC Ben Lawrence felt the adrenaline begin to course in his veins. This was what he loved about this job; the variety; never knowing quite what to expect, or when to expect it. He

was sure that even if he had been born a century ago he would still have ended up being a policeman.

He searched from room to room, and even flicked the curtains on the balcony door back to check out there; even though the door was locked and bolted from the inside. There was a definite odd, musty smell coming from the place. In fact, when he looked more closely he noticed that many things had a thick layer of dust on them. The balcony was cluttered with pots of long dead shrubs and flowers, limp and lifeless. The television set even had a sheet thrown over it.

The flat appeared utterly deserted.

Just as he was coming out of the flat a click of a door latch echoed loudly from down the corridor. His nerves slightly on edge, PC Lawrence turned quickly, one hand poised to pull the baton out of his belt. He was confronted with the sight of a figure, an old, frail woman in pale blue nightclothes, bending down to put a shopping bag full of rubbish outside the door. It wouldn't have been a problem if it wasn't for the fact that as she bent over her cleavage - and more - could all be too easily seen through the low-cut neck of her nightie.

She straightened up and turned to go back into the flat, apparently not noticing him. PC Lawrence felt slightly nauseated, but as always sought to be as professional as he could.

'May I have a word, Madam?'

The old woman stopped in her tracks. She had her back to him, yet did not turn around. She clearly wasn't deaf, yet she apparently wasn't going to answer.

He stepped forward. 'Madam?'

The old lady shuffled into her flat still further and turned to shut the door. Thinking quickly PC Lawrence went to wedge the end of his boot in between the door and the frame. When the old woman realised what he had done, her shrewdly creased face with angry ice-blue eyes peered through the opening.

'What do you want now?' she rasped, shaking an admonitory finger at the officer. 'My son hasn't done nothing, and he don't live here no more, so you leave me alone!'

PC Lawrence didn't have a clue in hell as to what the woman was going on about; he certainly didn't recognise her. He assumed she was either a bit senile, or some other officer looked quite like him. There had been quite a bit of trouble with some the youths living in Hollingwood Heights these past few months. One lad on a floor lower down had recently been locked up for four counts of burglary and aggravated vehicle taking.

He flashed his badge in front of her face.

'I'm sorry to disturb you Madam. I'm Constable Lawrence. May I come in?'

The old woman squinted at his badge, and then up into his eyes. Her face suddenly took on a look of revulsion, and perhaps a little fear.

'You're one of them,' she hissed, shrinking back from him. 'Get away, you're not welcome here!'

'I need to ask you some questions about your neighbour, Madam,' he explained firmly. 'If I don't ask you now I will only have to come back again later.'

The old woman, however, wasn't listening. She was too busy swearing and trying to prise the policeman's foot away from her door. At well over six foot tall with larger than average feet, Lawrence was quite a formidable officer, yet surprisingly, the old woman still succeeded in forcing his foot out the way, and Lawrence had the none-too-pleasant and all-too-common experience of having a front door slammed in his face.

PC Lawrence took a deep breath as he rubbed his nose. Why were the last callouts of the night hardly ever straightforward?

He bent down to speak loudly through the letter box.

'Madam, your next-door neighbour phoned the police around twenty minutes ago. I pressed the buzzer and she answered and let me in. But she appears to have left her flat, and I would like to know if you have seen her?'

'Go away or I'll call my son!' was the only answer he got. He tried shouting to her several more times, and even tried knocking loudly on other flat doors to speak to other neighbours, but to no avail. No one was going to answer the door to anybody at half past

four of a Sunday morning.

Well, so much for nice little old ladies and helpful neighbours. He would just have to pass this job onto someone at change of shift. Might even be a case for Missing Persons.

Reporting the job as 'area searched, no trace' to the Control Room, PC Lawrence made his way back along the stinking foyer back into the stinking lift area.

The tiny, piss-stained metal box of a lift rattled up to meet him and the doors opened. Lawrence pressed the G for ground floor and waited for the doors to close.

Nothing happened.

He pressed the G button again, harder, in case it had become jammed.

First floor button? Second floor button?

Nothing.

PC Lawrence blew another tired sigh through his cheeks. Typical bloody high-rise lifts.

The door to the back stairwell creaked open when he pushed it.

If possible, the stairwell smelt worse than the foyer and the lift combined. He couldn't say he wasn't used to it, though. He'd been in some vile-smelling places in his time; places where it had made more sense to wipe your feet on the way out, rather than on the way in. Places where dogs had been locked indoors for weeks on end, kitchens that were so dirty all the white kitchen appliances were filthy-brown with grease, and the carpets black and sticky with old cooking fat and food. He'd been in several houses where dead bodies had lain undiscovered and rotting for months. He'd even been in a home with a layer of human faeces trampled into the carpet.

Oxford's most squalid. You name a bad smell, he'd probably smelt it somewhere in the city at some time or other.

The sound of his boots echoed loudly off the concrete walls. He'd only gone down perhaps two floors when the sound of his footsteps seemed to be tailed by a second, more distant pair of footsteps.

He paused for a second. The echoes died away to silence.

Frowning, PC Lawrence continued to descend.

The sound of a second pair of footsteps returned, louder this time, and more quickly paced than his. He stopped again, and again, silence. He scoffed at himself for feeling ever so slightly nervous.

He started down the stairs again.

This time the footsteps were distinctive and loud as if they were running, perhaps only a couple of flights above him.

Feeling more irritated than afraid now, PC Lawrence abruptly turned and began to walk back up the stairs.

The sound of someone running continued, yet after climbing a flight of stairs he still hadn't met anyone.

He stopped, the sound stopped.

PC Lawrence broke into a sweat. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up on end, and almost jumped out of his skin when the sound of his radio suddenly crackled into action.

'Nine-Three-Four do you copy?'

He gave a nervous smile and began to walk down the stairs again, laughing inwardly at himself. He'd heard the sound of a radio so many times in the past twenty years; he hardly believed he'd just jumped at it!

'Roger Alpha Foxtrot. Nine-Three-Four on way back from my last call now,' he replied.

There was a short pause before the lady in the Control Room got back to him, and when she did her voice took on a more urgent tone. 'Roger Nine-Three-Four. There has just been another report of an intruder at Hollingwood. Flat twenty, fifth floor. Possible B and E. Caller male.'

He was about to key up to reply to Control, but something he saw on the stairwell below made him stop dead in his tracks.

There was a small pool of dark red liquid near the stair railings. Another dark pool glistened a few steps further down and another several steps after that…

His many experiences, ranging from murder scenes to fatal road traffic accidents led him to ascertain that it was fresh blood.

Very fresh blood.

PC Lawrence moved toward the wall and reached instinctively for his baton. 'Roger Alpha Foxtrot. Request urgent backup. Am in the-'

But he got no further; in the moment it takes a person to blink a silent, dark shadow had slammed onto him and sent him somersaulting over the stair banister to crumple like a ragdoll onto the flight of stairs below.

PC Lawrence was discovered fifteen minutes later lying unconscious in the stairwell of Hollingwood. Upon medical inspection he appeared to have suffered no further injuries other than concussion and a few small cuts to the head and neck. When he came round in the hospital, however, Lawrence was quick to ask colleagues about the blood trail, but the two other officers who had attended the scene drew a blank. They had seen no pools of blood in the stairwell other than the blood from the cut on Lawrence's own head. This of course was worrying; had he been so tired he imagined it?

Concerned that his may well have been the case, he decided to keep quiet about the fact he'd heard footsteps, and had seen a dark shadow. Instead he just let his colleagues joke that 'Lofty' Lawrence had tripped over his big feet and had fallen down the stairs.

The next day Ben Lawrence got home from the hospital with a heavy, thumping headache. They had scanned his brain and had found no swelling or bleeding. He still assumed it was from the concussion; if it kept up he would certainly be seeing the doctor again.

After another ten-minute call from his girlfriend at the office he finally decided to collapse into bed. His girlfriend, Lisa, didn't get home until seven at night sometimes, and when she arrived home she found her partner in bed, curtains and blinds drawn, curled up under the duvet and snoring loudly.

With him working shifts she was quite used to this, of course. They had been together five years, and when he was working a line

of nights and she was working late at the office she hardly got to speak to him.

She swept into the bedroom and kissed her boyfriend on the cheek. 'Hey sweety, how are you feeling?'

The snoring stopped. There was a short pause.

'Fine,' came the reply from under the duvet. 'Though I've got this really bad headache. Those aspirin of yours just won't shift it.'

Lisa frowned. 'Could be the concussion?'

'Could be,' was the vague reply.

'I'm getting a takeaway; want anything?'

'No, thanks.'

'Don't fancy Chinese?'

'Not really. Not hungry'

'Crispy Duck?'

Ben Lawrence gave an irritable sigh. 'Just let me sleep off this headache will you, Babe? I'll have something to eat later.'

Lisa raised her eyebrows in surprise, but said nothing more. As she shut the bedroom door and moved down the hallway she shook her head in confusion. It certainly wasn't like her Ben to refuse Crispy Duck.

Lawrence surprised all his colleagues by turning up to do his shift later on that evening. The Sarge seemed quite concerned and requested he did light duties for a week or so, yet Lawrence insisted he felt fine. In fact - truth be told - he had never felt better.

As ever, Oxford didn't go easy with the unpleasant surprises. The first and sole callout of the shift was a rather bloody murder, requiring several officers, Forensics of course, an ambulance, several TV crews, and a roll of 'Crime Scene – Do Not Cross' tape. The Sarge, of course, blamed it on himself for saying only yesterday that Oxford hadn't had a serious murder in quite some time.

PC Lawrence and three other colleagues were the first on the scene. It was pretty bad. The victim was an old lady, and from the looks of it she had been hacked into pieces in a ferocious attack. Blood was sprayed everywhere; floor, walls and ceiling. The torso was ripped open and the entrails pulled out, just - as the pathologist

later described - as if some large-clawed carnivore had opened her up. The woman's head was initially thought to be missing, until Forensics came across it tied up in a supermarket carrier bag out in the flat foyer. Forensics had even more harrowing surprise later on; an autopsy revealed that the head had not been cut or sawn from the body, but in fact torn off with brute force.

There were no witnesses to this monstrous occurrence, no CCTV footage, no murder weapon and most unsettlingly the neighbours all claimed to have not heard a thing.

Worse still; despite the numerous samples and dustings forensics had collected at the scene, they were unable to find a single scrap of the killer's DNA.

Poor old Morse never saw the like.

It was the first time one of the officers had been to a murder and he felt so ill he had to step out of the room and throw up.

Lawrence followed him out and patted him reassuringly on the shoulder. 'You'll get used to it, son. After twenty years in the business you'll not bat an eyelid.'

The young officer - who couldn't have been more than twenty-three years old – gave an ashen smile. 'I'm not sure I will. I mean, that's pretty sick stuff in there.'

An unsettling, rather satisfied smile spread across Lawrence's face; though the youngster, who was looking the other way at the time, did not catch it.

'Yes, I suppose it is,' he replied quietly, more to himself, than to anyone else.

There was another murder the following evening in the very same block of flats. The fifth floor, flat twenty. The victim was known to the police as a troublemaker. Again no witnesses, again no murder weapon; though what kind of murder weapon that could drain a body entirely of blood no one was certain. Two further murders in the same pattern followed the evening after that, but this time they were in another area of the city. Again the victims were known to the police, one a convicted rapist, the other a well-known drug-dealer out on bail.

The newspapers went crazy over the stories, and as the serial killer's gory rituals became known they were quick to dub him 'The Oxford Vampire.' The Council came under close scrutiny over the filthy state of some of its residences. The people of Hollingwood Heights especially had no idea in hell what had happened to them. Those that could fled to stay with relatives, those that couldn't barricaded themselves in and lived in fear.

As for PC Lawrence; well, he was as frantically busy as the other officers, but he was in a much better mood now he had found an effective way to lessen the heavy, incessant headache that had plagued him ever since that night he had fallen down the stairwell.

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THE SEA WITCH

by Mike Ward

Harry Camponara wasn't like most 11 year old boys. He didn't like watching football or cricket or any sport in particular and he didn't like interactive gaming either. He didn't like girls and he definitely didn't socialise in small talk with other boys. Harry Camponara never really noticed that he had a problem, but he did.

Harry lived in the house on the edge of the rocks overlooking the sea. It was a large house where he lived with his mother and father and little sister Lily. Father was always working away selling pies for the Piermont Pie Company, situated near the schoolhouse on Ridgmont Street, at the southeast corner of town. It meant that nothing much got done at home, so the house looked dull and unloved.

This wasn't a true reflection of the Camponara's feelings towards their house. It was true however, that the barn door was hanging off, the grey paint peeled from the wooden latts, and the guttering was rusted, and coming apart, over the front porch window.

Mrs Camponara swept the two story house on a weekly basis, she washed, ironed, and prepared meals for the table, and she even kept the nets white in the windows, but she wasn't one for picking up a hammer, or a paint brush, she said that that was Mr Camponara's job, and he just didn't have the time or the inclina-

tion.

'One day Love,' Mr Camponara would say, 'One day, when I get on top of this blessed mortgage, I'll make this into the most beautiful house in Cornwall.'

'By then the kids will have grown up and the house will have fallen down,' she replied frowning. But she wasn't really angry, just frustrated because he wasn't home as much as she would have liked. Most of the time he was up and out early, well before the children had awoke, and sometimes he would be away for two days at a time, and the rest, arriving back just before bedtime.

If the van were near enough to home, he would park it in a lay-by, and hitch a ride home. Sometimes walking and riding with a number of different people, for up to eighty miles. She knew that this was hard for Mr Camponara, and that he would have to be up, hitching his way back even earlier the following morning, than he normally would, if he was going to the factory, but he had to keep an eye on the tacho-graph, to much time, or to many miles, and young Mr Piermont Junior would be giving him his cards.

It held the family together, it made her feel safe, wanted, she knew that he wanted to be with her, and the children. He made such efforts to be with them, and that was all that really mattered.

Harry loved the house almost as much as Mrs Camponara because it had everything that a boy like him needed. Well - I suppose it wasn't so much the house that Harry loved, but where it was situated. On one side there was the sea, the rocks, and the beach. On the other there was the woods, lanes, farms and fields and not to mention the town only a two-mile walk away. You see; Harry was always looking for adventure, a challenge, something to raise the adrenaline, and this was the perfect place to find it. He wasn't a bad boy, not really, although some people may have thought he was.

For example there was the time that Harry and Johnny Pothelswait planned and executed a raid on a Piermont Pie Van at four o'clock in the morning. It was parked up alongside a dozen other vans with the back doors open, awaiting trays of freshly made pies in the Piermont Pie factory car park. The night shift bakers

made their pies and loaded them into the vans in preparation for the drivers starting early the following morning.

Johnny and Harry waited in the darkness, whispering to one another, drawing up their plans, against the cold brick factory wall, their smoky grey breaths drifting from cold chattering lips, their skin prickling from the penetrating cold.

Then the clanging and chinking of chains hailing the opening of the Pie factory gates in preparation for the day shift drivers. It was a relief from the boredom and cold, Harry recognised it as a big part of the challenge. To suffer the cold, and the boredom, many would have floundered and returned to their warm beds, even at this early stage in the game.

'I'll wait here and keep watch for you,' Johnny whispered as Harry moved towards the gate.

Harry glanced back into Johnny's eyes for a moment. He knew that Johnny was scared, he could sense it, so he smiled back at him, before moving silently along the side wall, following the shadows, crouching, hugging the brick, until he reached the back of the first of a long line of vans.

The back doors were open and the internal lights in the back of the vans were on creating arced shadows on the smooth black bay floor. The smells were drifting out towards his nose, leading Harry like a fragrant hand, into the back of the first van he came to.

Steam rose from a pie, as the soft pastry tore open, releasing delicious smells, of freshly cooked potatoes and meat and gravy. Harry's lips meandered around the heat trying not to burn, whilst his eyes surveyed the half filled shelves of heavenly delicacies. They were covered by thin layers of white tissue paper, which protected them from flies and other little insects that were attracted to the van by the internal light. Harry lifted each layer with interest. Rows of pies on each shelf, in all shapes and sizes, cakes too, custards and strawberry and lemon tarts lined up in little paper cases.

Suddenly something caught the corner of Harry's eye, he turned quickly towards the door and his heart sank instantly. The mission had failed; Harry knew it, he had taken too long, absorbed by what he could smell and see, he had been consumed by his own

gluttony and now it was too late. There he stood trapped in the back of the van, pie in his own criminal hand.

Not his Dad's van either, but Authur Von Strictum, who proceeded to clip him around the back of his head, and yell at him indignantly, which sprung Harry from an embarrassing, shameful, stillness, into a torrent of panicky movement. The adrenaline flowed through Harry's red-blooded veins, fight or flight consumed him, and this was what Harry had really come for, without even knowing it. He grabbed another pie, now unnerved by his captor then pushed past the big man, as if he was a light weight and ran out of the van, along the black bay, out of the gates and up Ridgemont street as fast as he could.

Johnny had waited by the Piermont gates for the spoils then the two of them ran off together, laughing into the darkness, the streetlights occasionally silhouetting their form.

After jogging a short distance, the boys arrived at the Quayside, and began to walk along the dimly lit harbour where the fishing boats rested for the night. All along the quay, big metal loops attached to heavy, reddish brown, chains, were screwed into the stone edging at regular intervals, and beyond them there was a drop of eight or twelve feet into the gently rolling black sea.

On the other side of the harbour, shops and houses and taverns lined the road, and behind them, houses dotted the hillside making it look quite quaint and picturesque. Harry could see lights in some of the houses proclaiming the start of another busy day. During the summer, the inhabitants of the town were always up early, preparing for another influx of tourists.

Dots of yellow and white and dimmer shades of colour, moved in dishevelled shapes, it was reflected from the houses and contorted by the movement of the waves, forming patterns on its surface, as if it were a black canvas, made vibrant and alive.

Two of the boats were trawlers, big and rusted, and in need of a little paint. Harry noted how alike they both were. 'One day I'm going to work on one of these boats, what do you reckon Johnny, fancy being a fisherman?'

'Hard work Harry, cold, wet - dangerous too.'

'Nothing wrong with a little danger, Johnny.' Harry smiled.

'Yes that's all right,' Johnny agreed, 'but the sea, she's not to be messed with. D' yer know what my Dad says? The sea is like a woman in love. If you put down your guard, she'll wrap herself around you and she'll never let go, not until death do you part, at any rate.'

Harry appeared undeterred; in fact he thrilled on Johnny's words. Behind the wheelhouse, gathered grey nets lay on the deck in a pile. One end of the net was hoist up over a metal boom, a guide for lowering the nets over the back of the boat into the cold sea, like a limp body hanging by its feet. The boats were like sleeping men held up in a crowd, being jostled, pulling and pushing them, this way and that, causing them to bob slowly up and down, and occasionally scraping the harbour wall buffers, creating a sound like an old man's snore.

The boys walked on past the sleeping trawlers, to the first set of stone steps, that led down to some of the smaller boats. They too were tied to the wall, but by ropes, which had worn from a soft blue to a dirty grey, and fraying at the ends, after years of tying and untying.

The smaller boats were used to take tourists mackerel and wreck fishing, just off the coast. They carried about ten or twelve people on each trip, and during the summer, made three or four trips out each day.

Harry sat down to catch his breath, heart still racing, chest heaving and burning, and adrenaline not yet relinquished.

'Wasn't expecting the German to be there that early, was you Harry?' Johnny laughed.

'No I wasn't, he gave me a bit of a start, trapped in the back of that van. I thought we had at least another forty minutes to an hour. Doesn't the man sleep? Next time you can go in and I'll keep a look out,' insisted Harry, handing Johnny a pie.

'Ye, Ok Harry.' Johnny replied thinking *you've got no chance.* 'I bet you're in for it now though Harry. When your Dad gets home tonight, I bet your really going to get it.'

'So what; it was worth it wasn't it?' Harry smiled, putting the

pie to his lips, smells drifting into his nose, and taking another bite.

Johnny just looked at him uneasily.

Surprisingly Dad didn't shout or yell or scream at Harry that night, which he had prepared himself for and would have ignored. Dad just sat in the chair reading the paper. Mum was in the kitchen washing the dishes when Dad spoke, without even lifting his head from the print. Harry was still sat at the round pine table putting the last spoon of warm apple crumble and custard into his mouth. From there he could see the side of his Dad's head. His hair had thinned and he had put on his thick, black, glasses to read. Harry felt uneasy because the room was so quiet, even after eating warm apple crumble and custard; he was still left with an inexorable, nervous, ache. '*When would it come, Dad must know about it, so why hadn't he come in shouting?'* Harry wondered. He would have preferred it that way; anything would be better than this silence and tension. Perhaps he hadn't been told; perhaps he hadn't seen Von Strictum, or maybe Von Strictum thought that a clip around the ear was enough. For a short time, as he sat at the table, that's all he could hope for, and then he knew.

'Come and sit over here Harry,' his Dad said in a quiet voice.

Harry's heart sank. Hesitantly he walked over and sat on the edge of the sofa appearing a little tense, palms sweating, keeping a healthy distance between him and his father.

'I hear you were down at the factory this morning' he continued calmly turning the page. A moments unsettled silence. The clattering of wiped dishes and pans stopped and Harry knew that Mum was listening from the kitchen.

'Er, Ye'

'Was you hungry then?'

More silence.

'Er, No'

'Look Harry - I know you don't mean no harm' he explained calmly, 'but next time it's going to be my job. You do know how much I need this job don't you?'

Harry knew; he knew how much they all needed it.

'Sorry Dad it won't happen again I promise,' Harry replied sin-

cerely. Dad glanced and smiled at Harry, as he folded his newspaper, timed perfectly for an outstretched hand, which collected a cup of tea from Mrs Camponara.

But Harry knew that there would be a next time, there had to be, the mission had failed, and for Harry failure was not an option.

Another time Harry was lay face down in amongst the tall grass that lined the edge of Mr Farndale's field. His land bordered the Camponara's, down the dirt track road that led from the house on the edge of the rocks. Harry passed it everyday on his way to school, but today was a Saturday and the sun was high in the sky. *'Slowly, slowly, ever so,'* Harry thought as he moved through the grass, like a soldier on a sniper mission. Silently he lifted his head, fearful that his neck might creak, and give away his position. There it was, the White Mare. Harry felt some disappointment, she was out of range, but he also felt the adrenaline rising within him, it was more challenging. Perspiration tickled the back of his neck, but he was unable to do anything about it, one wrong move, one uncontrolled movement of his hand, he thought, and the horse will have bolted, and his chance lost. Harry calculated that if he could get over there, 'unseen,' to the tree on the right of the field, in amongst that long green foliage, he would have a chance.

You see, Harry wasn't a bad lad. He didn't really want to hurt the mare, but the excitement of not being heard by her, until it was too late, and not being caught by Mr Farndale, was doubly gratifying. Eventually Harry reached the tree.

The horse was in range, chewing the grass, and completely unaware, Harry hadn't been seen. He took up a kneeling position between some big green leaves and tall wild grasses, which camouflaged him from the horse. Then aware of his balance, it had to be perfect, completely still; he slowly inhaled, and pulled back the small, white, stone, in his black leather pouch. He stretched the elastic, aiming now between the two forks, for the horse's rump. He pulled; until it would stretch no more, pressure aching his wrist and arms, and then he let it fly.

The stone hit with a thud, causing the mare's flesh to shudder like the reaction to a giant biting fly. Her eyes widened in shock,

and horror, and squealing, she lifted into the air, before galloping off to the other side of the field. *'Now things should become interesting'* Harry thought, lowering himself back down into the foliage. He knew that he hadn't been seen, so slowly he moved around the field for another shot.

After a few hours, and a couple more shots, and the excitement had gone. It wasn't fun anymore, he could do it, and he hadn't come close to getting caught. In fact Mr Farndale hadn't even been near the field all day.

So you start to get the picture about how Harry thinks. Even when he went out shooting birds, it wasn't the shooting of the bird, with a stone, and it would have to be a stone, a gun would have been just to easy, but it's the being able to. Once he could, then he stopped, but until he could, he was relentless. Shock, pain, suffering, even death, don't come into it, not in Harry's world.

'When you're in pain, you know that you're alive,' Harry's Gran had said to him, the previous year.

Ironically; not long before she had died. He liked that; it supported how he felt, and he made everything feel alive, for a short time at least, until he was bored.

It was just after tea, when Johnny came into view on the dirt track road, leading to the house. His legs going so fast, they were barely visible, bike rocking violently from side to side, and bell ringing as if he needed to tell people, he had arrived.

Harry sat on the porch bench watching as Johnny's bike skidded to a halt. *'Dick'* he thought smiling to himself, watching Johnny threw the bike to the ground, like a used toffee wrapper.

'Hi Johnny - what's up?' Harry asked in a loud voice.

'Oh nothing, I just thought I'd pop over to see yer.'

Johnny sat on the bench. His head seemed quite empty at first, as if he was waiting for Harry to say something. For a moment there was an uncomfortable silence.

Harry felt a little confused. *'Why would Johnny ride up to the house like a mad man on a mission, if has nothing to tell, it just doesn't make sense'* he thought. He hated the silence; it made him feel agitated and uneasy, so he decided to confess to his latest

adventure.

'You'll never guess what I've been doing today.'

Johnny smiled excitedly turning on his seat towards Harry as the words flowed from his lips. Johnny knew it would be good. Harry's adventures were always good. 'What?' He replied enthusiastically.

Harry lowered his voice, glancing momentarily to the porch window. Johnny knew what he meant. Mrs Camponara, on the other side of the window, he didn't want her to hear. But that made it sound even more intriguing, before he had even begun to speak.

'I've been over to old Farndale's place, on a sniper mission.'

Johnny looked into Harry's hazel eyes, 'you've not killed him have you?'

Harry's laughed, 'what do you think I am? No of course I haven't killed him, never even saw him, come to that.' Johnny's shoulders seemed to slump back into their usual rounded posture, as if relieved from momentary tension. Harry smiled, 'I've been on a sniper mission on Bessy.'

Johnny tensed up again, 'what you've killed old Bessy?'

'No' Harry's laughed pushing on Johnny's shoulder. 'I haven't killed anyone. I sneaked up on her, with my catapult. She didn't see me, or hear me, it was great, and I shot her in the arse.'

'You never?' Johnny replied, as if shocked.

'I did, three times I got her, before she saw it was me. No point doing it then, so I came home. Mind you it's amazing how fast time goes, by then, it was nearly tea time.'

'Wish you'd come for me, I reckon I would have enjoyed that.'

'Oh no Johnny, a sniper always works alone.'

Johnny poured a jug of lemonade into a glass, which Mrs Campanara had prepared earlier. He placed it back on the table, by the side of the porch bench then sat down next to Harry's looking out to sea, as the light began to fade.

'I never do anything on my own – can't ever think of anything to do on my own.' For a moment Johnny seemed disappointed with his lack of imagination.

The Sun had turned orange, and distant, reflecting on the water above the horizon, like an orange tennis ball. The boys could feel the evening air-cooling around them; the sun was about to disappear behind the horizon. They listened to the gentle waves shimmering up, onto the beach, below the rocks, shushing to them.

Harry said, 'Don't you think it's funny how sometimes the sun is like a tennis ball and sometimes it's like a football?'

'Doesn't look like a tennis ball or a football to *me*. Anyway, I've never really thought about it.' Johnny replied, not interested.

'Tell me Johnny – what did you come over for, really?'

Harry felt Johnny's hesitation, silent thought then nothing. Then finally he took a deep breath as though he had made up his mind, and he had decided to tell his tale and raised his tone.

'My Grandfather came over today. He told me this wild tale about something that had happened to him, when he was a boy.' Johnny laid the now empty glass on the floor by his feet, and put on a croaky voice mimicking his old Grandfather, 'I remember when I was a boy your age,' Johnny began chest jerking humour, 'me and Tommy Elcinarb, took out old Stevenson's boat. Pitch black it was, like drifting on black tar, with only a few tiny lights reaching out to us from the town.

'We put the rods out anyway, dropping those lines into the black mire. It felt wrong that night, as if we shouldn't be there, dropping those lines into that sea, connecting to it, like putting your arms in, to feel below the surface, or stepping into a demons house uninvited. Do you know what I mean? Grandpa said.'

'He really said this?' Harry asked quite amazed.

'He really did. It sent a shiver down my spine, partly because I could see the fear in his eyes.'

'I love this part of the day,' Harry said in a quiet monotone voice, still looking out to sea.

'Aren't you listening to me Harry?'

'Yes I'm listening. I'm listening, but I'm not believing.'

'Good - because now, it gets really interesting.' Johnny stressed, 'he said that they had taken out the Sea Witch to do some night fishing.'

'You mean Old Wiley's boat?'

'Ye, but it wasn't Old Wiley's boat then, it belonged to Tommy Elcinarb's dad. Anyway; he reckons they were fishing out in the bay, not having a single bite, so they moved around, reeling in, and letting out, in different spots, darkness all around them.

Then something really strange happened. It was as though they'd settled over a giant hole in the bay, because the weight on the line just kept going, and going, spinning down, deeper off the reel. Grandpa said, that he thought he was going to run out of line, when he hit bottom, then almost instantly the rod bent over, and the reel started screaming, as more line was pulled out. He said that he flicked the lock over, and began reeling in as fast as he could. Not easy when you're our age Harry, you know that. One hell of a fight broke out, and the boat was tipping from side to side, and the rod was bending, and pulling in all directions. 'Let it go, let it go,' Tommy shouted, but Grandpa said, that he wanted that fish, so he continued to reel it in. Tommy had moved to the back of the boat, holding on to both the back, and the side, for fear he was going to be thrown out. Then he got the shock of his life, he said.' Johnny paused as if in fear, of what he was about to say next.

'What – what?' Harry asked, now quite excited, 'don't stop now!'

'It wasn't a fish at all, but a grey hand, which had thrown itself over the side of their boat. Grandpa threw his rod down to his side instantly, terrified as long knobbly fingers moved down the wooden lats of the boat, towards him. Its fingernails were dirty, and broken, and the flesh around them was broken into lacerated cuts, as if it had been hooked, and not healed, many times before. Its arm bent over the side of the boat, and it started to pull itself slowly from the water. Black robes, covered it from the elbow, and disappeared into the black tar waves. Then suddenly from below the surface, the curved shape of a head, covered in the black robe, rose up.

Grandpa said, he could not see its face, until it tilted back its head, causing the robe to fall away, and then he looked into its horrible, yellow, eyes, and its grotesque, rotted, face. Grandpa threw himself back away from it, landing next to Tommy. He said, he was

so scared at that point, because the witch's boney hand was snatching at them, and its cold eyes was piercing into them, that he just closed his eyes, whimpering, and screaming.'

'Whimpering.' Harry cackled.

'Ye – well you would be too.' Johnny replied defensively.

'Ye well I don't believe it, he's pulling your wedge.' Harry sniggered.

'He's not Harry, I'm telling you. You should have seen the fear in his face, when he got into it, and I'll tell you something else. When Grandpa opened his eyes, Tommy was gone, and nobody ever saw Tommy again. He had a tear in his eye when he said that. Apparently there was a hell of a balou about it. Some people said that Grandpa had killed Tommy, and threw him over board, but then there was no body, and none was ever found. Apparently Tommy's father went out regular, trying to find his body, and he never spoke to Grandpa again, not ever.'

'So what you're saying is that your Grandpa and Tommy went out fishing *in* the Sea Witch, and Tommy was snatched from the boat *by* a Sea Witch, and he was never seen again.'

'Ye that just about sums it up, except for one thing.' Johnny hesitated, as he had done before then in a creepy voice he said. 'It was on this very night, fifty years ago.'

The Sun finally settled, blackening the waves and sky then the porch light came on and the closed curtains dimmed the lights in the house. But the sea continued to call out to them, through the darkness, shushing them, as the waves hit the shore.

'I know, let's ride down to town and borrow Old Wiley's boat for a few hours, put out a rod, what do yer say?'

'I knew you'd say that Harry, that's why I hesitated about telling you. Grandpa told me not to go out tonight. He told me the story because he knows boys our age take the boats out; he said that he did when he was our age. But not tonight Harry, he doesn't want us to take out a boat tonight, it's for our own good. In fact he said, that that was the only reason he told me this story, in the first place, he doesn't want anything to happen to us.'

'Get out of it, Johnny, you don't believe all that nonsense do you? Come on - it will be it the best adventure we have ever had.

And it'll have to be Wiley's boat, the Sea Witch too, or it won't be the same.'

'I dunno Harry, what if we get caught?'

'If that's all we've got to worry about,' Harry sniggered. 'We won't get caught, come on; it's better than sitting around here all night, and the tides coming in. Let's catch ourselves a Sea Witch.'

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The house was quiet when Harry slid up the dining room window. He straddled one leg out and pulled himself through into the darkness and cold. 'You out here, Johnny?'

Johnny's whispered voice replied almost immediately, as he stepped out of the bushes by the house. 'I'm over here.'

'I must say Johnny, I'm surprised you've come.'

'Why? – I said I would, didn't I?' Johnny replied defensively.

'Thought that you might of fell asleep that's all.'

Harry walked around the outside of the house towards the shed, which barely stood, brown and decrepit, falling down, and yet determined to remain upright, as if tilting on two or three stilts, with rotten planks angled and un-nailed. Harry had faith in it anyway, as he had walked into it, on a daily basis for his bike, and other things that weren't allowed in the house, without ever once fearing that it might fall down around him.

He lifted two rods and a dirty old kaki green bag from the floor in the darkest corner of the shed.

'Here, put this on,' he told Johnny offering him one of the two black and red nylon coats that had hung on a nail behind the door. 'It might be cold out there.'

Johnny took the coat without speaking and slipped it on. He looked up after straightening the collar to see Harry's, moon reflected, grey shape, clearly visible in the shed doorway. 'Boy you look funny. You're not going to wear that are you?'

'Ye - why what's wrong with it?' Harry looked down at himself.

His arms had extended to near his knees, and his hands had

disappeared completely beneath the fabric. The body of the coat seemed to extend so low, that if it were any longer, he would be unable to walk for a fear of tripping over it.

'What's wrong with it?' Johnny smiled, 'it's your Dad's, that's what's wrong with it.'

'Well that's Ok init – you've got mine, and he won't know. Anyway I don't care what it looks like, it's warm like a sleeping bag, in fact it's too warm to wear, whilst we're just stood around here yackin.' Harry had an impatient tone in his voice.

'But Harry, it's only 10 o'clock, what if we bump into some of the kids from class when we get down into town? They'll tear you apart looking like that,' eyes wide, expressing concern.

'We won't, it's pretty unlikely, most of them will be in bed by now, and if we do, I'll just ride past, they won't bother me.'

Harry sensed Johnny's reluctance, he was unsure whether it was he, that Johnny was trying to protect, or was he just looking for any excuse, not to go out on the Sea Witch. Harry was determined to go, and it had to be tonight. Johnny's story reeling inside him, the fiftieth anniversary, August 8th; today, a flush of excitement dizzied his head, bringing a warm glow to his cheeks. A sea witch, imagine seeing a *real* sea witch, and even better, imagine capturing one. He mentioned nothing of his thoughts to Johnny, and outwardly he struggled to remain calm, the excitement was getting all too much for him. He had no intentions of unnerving Johnny, not if he could help it.

He looked into the clear, black, sky, dotted with white diamonds. There was hardly any breeze coming over the cliff edge, from the sea, towards the house, only sea sounds, whispering on the shore in the distance.

'Right we've got what we need, let's go.' Harry threw the bag over his shoulder and clasped his hand around the rods, before climbing onto his bike.

Before long the boys were on the Quayside by the steps, which led down to where the Sea Witch bobbed steadily upon the waves. Harry dropped his bike, without hesitation, but Johnny wavered anxiously. Legs still astride his paint chipped bike, his face clearly

fearful and staring down repulsively at the Sea Witch. There she was, ochre brown, twelve feet long, four feet wide and two feet above the water.

'She looks very small Harry, don't you think? She doesn't normally look that small, not in the daylight anyway.'

Johnny stared down at her, his face tense, with lines to old for his age, 'I've changed my mind,' he said assertively. 'I'm not going, I've decided,' his voice quivering with visions from his grandfather's words. 'You know there could be something in it. Maybe there is a sea witch waiting out there to snatch some young kid into the sea.'

Harry sat on the steps defeated, and looking up to where Johnny still stood, astride his bike. 'Come on Johnny you know it's nonsense. Even kids our age know the difference between what's real and what's not – don't we?' questioning the possibilities of two answers. 'Alright we've sat through some scary films, scared ourselves half to death, had a laugh, but we know it's not real, don't we?'

Johnny nodded, he had to agree, his face beginning to relax. 'I suppose I must sound a bit stupid, being afraid of a story like that, but Grandpa seemed so sure about what he was saying.'

'Yes; but did you really believe it – seriously,' Harry smiled. 'Johnny you know that I like your Granddad, don't you, but he is old, memories fade, things get confused – seriously.'

'Well I'm not sure. I did at the time, but it does seem a little far-fetched now.'

'A little far-fetched! It's farther than most of the horror films, we've watched, on a Saturday night. Keep it real Johnny, keep it real.'

Johnny climbed from his bike and sat on the step next to Harry. 'I know what you're saying Harry, but is it worth taking the chance. We could go out tomorrow night instead, or we could use another boat.'

'And where's the fun in that? If you take the adventure out of the adventure then we might as well just stay in bed. Not bother doing anything, not bother going anywhere,' disappointment in his

voice. 'You know Johnny, I think that you might be believing some of this nonsense after all.'

'I'm not Harry – I'm not,' Johnny insisted.

'Look your Granddad said that there is big hole in the bay, so let's stop messing around and get out there. Let's prove the old fellow wrong, and maybe catch one or two fish, in the process.'

'But what if there is Harry, what if there is?'

'Then I'll throw myself at it, and you can tell everyone that I saved you from the sea witch. I'll be a hero.'

'A dead hero.'

Harry's smiled again as he did whenever something unnerved him, but this time he felt a cold tingle go down his spine. His body shuddered as he climbed to his feet, to descend the wet, shiny, steps, to the sea.

'Get in, Johnny, and I'll pass you the rods,' Harry whispered, still feeling anxious, that Johnny may change his mind again, if he got in first. Then Harry felt some relief, Johnny was in, and holding the rods, he hadn't wanted to sit in a boat in the middle of the bay by himself all night, and until now, it hadn't looked promising from Johnny's perspective. In fact he couldn't believe that Johnny had actually summoned the courage to get into the boat. Harry secretly revelled in satisfaction, that his powers of persuasion were not totally useless. It was as though, the first part of the mission had already been achieved. Now they had to get out of the harbour, without being seen.

The mission was on. He untied the rope and stepped onto the moving floor of the little boat. Noises from across the water, laughing and jeering, as four figures stepped out of Black Jim's. They could see arms supporting wavering bodies, the noise quieting, as they moved further into the distance, singing. Then more people began rolling out of the Pirates Inn, and Blue Dogs, a few doors along, high spirited and echoing laughter across the water.

'Throwing out time already,' Harry commented surprised.

'I guess it's 11 o'clock then. We'd better get moving if we want to catch the high tide.'

Harry wasn't concerned, the hull of the Sea Witch was so high

in the water, she could sail out on any tide. Perhaps Johnny's was thinking about catching a few fish, must be,' Harry thought, 'Otherwise like me, he wouldn't be concerned which way the tide was going.'

He pulled the cord chugging the little outboard engine into life.

'Johnny, throw that rope onto the side, quickly,' ordered Harry, still whispering, but with some urgency about him. He did; and settled unspoken onto a seat near the front of the boat. The boat was free from its mooring and about to set off, when a deep strong voice, gave them a start.

'Hey you boys.'

The boys look up the wall immediately, to where a black silhouette of a large, bulky, man, stared down at them. Harry's mind raced, his jaw dropped, perspiration instantly gathering on his back. Old Wiley, he thought, then unsure, filing sounds through his memory, trying to verify his assumption, and at the same time, he felt consumed by urgency to escape. What ever it takes to get away. Once more after his hesitation, he wanted to turn the throttle and escape from whoever it was. Then panicking the voice spoke not angrily, but more anxiously to them again 'wait, wait!' But Harry had managed to turn the throttle and steer the boat away from the wall and steps, where the dark figure had already rushed, to descend upon them. He shouted again, almost painfully to stop, 'not the Sea Witch, not the Sea Witch, the voice cried out. But Harry, in his panic to escape, cleared the harbour wall, with its light flashing, guiding them out into the bay.

The little boat bounced onwards across the waves. Up and down she went, spray lashing her sides, wetting the cold faces of the two boys. Harry looked back from where they had come, to see the Old man with the stocky build, and deep voice, waving his arms to them then he seemed to fall out of sight, and they were alone on the black sea in the dead of night.

'Jesus Johnny, Old Wiley nearly had us then, he'll kill us tomorrow when we bring his boat back,' panic still in Harry's voice.

Johnny climbed forward along the boat, stepping over the seats, up to Harry's face; his grey slate eyes shining and welling a tear onto his cheek. But Harry, aware of his tear, didn't see sadness, only emptiness. and fear in his eyes. Harry felt for the first time, that it was beyond his control, confrontational, a moments silence that seemed to last forever, their faces only inches apart. Johnny's bottom lip quivered then calmly he revealed, 'That wasn't Wiley, that was my grandfather.'

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Harry felt a cold shiver run down his spine thinking about the mournful, desperate, tone in Johnny's grandfather's voice. Wailing from the harbour wall, as if they had done some terrible deed towards him. At the same time, his skin became warm, and clammy, making him feel a little sick. Johnny slowly reversed away from Harry's face still staring, but now silent until he sat on the cold, hard, polished, wooden, surface where he lowered his head.

Maybe his grandfather had been telling the truth. Not just amusing Johnny with some weird story, passing the time, but genuinely telling the truth about what happened to him as a boy. Could it be possible for a story so unbelievable to have actually happened? Harry shirked it from his mind once again. No it couldn't be true, but then again, the old man's voice was horrifyingly real. There was absolutely no doubt that he believed what he had been saying, no doubt at all.

It was the first time Harry had really considered the possibility that it might be real. The game was really to embellish the story, to make it into an interesting, exciting, night. To become involved in the story, and act it out, in every detail, role-play with added excitement. But if this was really for real… Harry shuddered at the thoughts. He looked back towards the tiny light on the shore, considering the prospect of turning the little boat around and going in. He looked at the oily blackness of the ice-cold sea then to Johnny, who was about to put his hand into it.

'No Johnny,' Harry shouted anxiously. 'Don't put your hand

into the water.' But it was too late. Johnny looked surprised, almost shocked at Harry's outburst. His fingers had touched below the surface and he saw nothing wrong in that, he did not realise that he was entering into the lair of monsters and demons, but Harry had considered it now.

The lair of monsters and demons; was the place where, according to the Bible, all demons come from, and return to, when they were cast from men, and children. Harry remembered a chapter he had read about Jesus casting out demons from a man, it says that they were cast out and entered a herd of pigs nearby. In their fright, and madness, and possession, they were forced by the demons into the sea and drowned, which enabled them to return, from whence they had come.

The adventure hadn't been much fun so far, a little too intense, by the look on Johnny's face. He wished now that he had come alone, and was still considering returning to where the harbour light flashed on and off, showing them the way home. It was not for his sake, he was thinking about returning to dry land, he could take it, even the old man shouting, not a problem for Harry, but the despair on Johnny's face, he hadn't seen him cry before, it was harrowing.

Johnny had instantly retrieved his hand from the water shouting, 'What – what?' as if he had missed something that Harry had seen.

'Nothing,' he replied quietly, as if mistaken.

'What do you mean, nothing? I nearly jumped out of my skin then, I thought I was about to get my hand bitten off!' still shouting. Johnny picked up a rod, unhooked a hook from the reel and began stretching out the silver foil strips between his fingers.

'Listen Johnny – I've been thinking. Things haven't gone so well tonight, you know with your grandfather and all. Maybe we should give it a miss, what do ya think?'

Johnny laughed sarcastically. 'Well we're here now, we've done all the damage we can do, we've upset everyone who's likely to get upset. Or we will have by the time my grandfather has finished with us, so I don't really think that it matters now anyway, do

you?'

Harry thought for a moment, hesitating before mentioning the sea witch. Cringing because it was he, that had dismissed the story as purely fiction, and made Johnny feel stupid in the process. It had been a victory in the manipulation of his character, from '*I'm not going to – well we might as well stay, and get on with it now, we're here.*' That appeared to be Johnny's attitude now. Then; as if struck by a bolt of lightening, Harry realised that Johnny's hesitation, and borderline cowardice, hadn't had anything to do with the sea witch or the story at all. Poor Johnny, Harry thought, he must have been struggling between what I wanted him to do, and what his Grandfather had told him to do. It was no wonder he felt so bad, when his Grandfather shouted to him, in such a harrowing tone, almost begging him to get out of the boat. Harry was consumed with guilt; he couldn't possibly tell him now, that he suspected that there may be some truth in his Grandfather's words.

'Sorry Johnny,' Harry forced from his lips, hoping that Johnny wouldn't ask him why he was apologising.

'Oh forget it, we're here now, let's get these rods out, and test the bottom of this bay.' Johnny replied suggesting he was ready to shrug off the incident earlier, to get on with the job in hand.

Harry was relieved that Johnny's tone had risen, encouraging him think that things might improve after all.

The soft undulating black sea moved the boat up and down, as if caressing it in its arms, like a mother gently rocking her baby to sleep. It was about eleven fifteen and the sky was almost as black as the sea, except for the stars scattered around, as if God had thrown them out randomly, onto a black table. And the moon had risen above them, reflecting onto the water, like a big round lantern. Its light lit up the side of the boat, separating it from the sea by a thin white beam, and trailing off into an arc, suggesting the shape of the boat, and its occupants.

Johnny had only lifted his fingers from the water a few minutes earlier, and they were only in there, submerged, for a few seconds, but still it was long enough, to make Harry shudder at the thoughts of something pulling him over the side and into the black,

murky, depths.

It had only been a few minutes, the boat had stopped, the engine turned off, and silence, except for the rustle of the boys jackets, as they moved about, preparing their rods, and checking their lures.

Then suddenly, a long screeching sound, high pitched, and haunting from beneath the boat. The boys stopped moving instantly. Fear had gripped them both, holding them still, hoping whatever it was, had not noticed them. Then Johnny couldn't hold himself any longer. The silence was terrifying for him.

'What was that?' He whispered quickly, his breath pouring from his mouth like smoke eager to escape.

'I don't know,' replied Harry, his mouth dropping at the edges.

'Could it have been a whale, a dolphin, something like that?' Johnny searched for a logical explanation.

Harry realised that Johnny was trying to make some sort of sense from it, as if it had to be something natural. His eyes shone, the moon glistening on moisture, and his lip had dropped and quivered. Harry knew from his expression that he was scared, he knew that even if he agreed with Johnny, that it might be a whale, he wouldn't believe him. He didn't believe it himself, but fear that he might bring it upon himself, stopped him from saying, what he really thought.

An icy coldness surrounded him, making bumps and hairs stand up all over his body, and all he could do was to stare back, into Johnny's pitiful eyes. Then as he spoke, his voice crumbling out the words, 'I don't know Johnny.'

The screech echoed once more from beneath the boat, causing it to shudder beneath their cold feet. It was if the sound had a force to it, which lifted the boat upwards, and downwards, in quick succession, causing it to shudder, and the boys to shout out uncontrollably, grasping on to wooden edges, and praying that it would stop.

Harry threw his rod down, clattering onto the deck. His legs almost jellified, wobbling, towards the back of the boat, he fell onto the outboard motor, desperate to get it started. His mind filled with the sea witch and little Tommy. Fear of what it might be,

beneath them, rising up from the bottom of the black mire, coming up for them, coming for him, screeching at him.

Johnny was thinking the same thing and tried desperately to get himself to the back of the boat, scrambling to that engine alongside Harry. To pull on that white chord, he yearned to pull that chord, and hear its gritty sounds, buzzing into life. He yearned to steer them towards the flashing lights, and the safety of the harbour, and more than anything he wished that they had never gone out in the Sea Witch.

But they hadn't reached the chord when they heard a thud on the side of the boat near to them. Only a piece of wood stood between them and whatever it was on the other side in the icy waters. Harry looked up; his body sprawled across the last seating, his head near the back of the boat, close to the engine, his hand, claw fingered, reaching out for the chord.

'Quick Harry, quick,' Johnny's voice whispered in an effervescent tone. 'Oh God pull the chord.'

Harry stopped suddenly, he put his finger to his lips, his eyes wide then brow frowning, he pointed frantically to where the thud sound had come, and looked again at Johnny, praying he would be silent.

Nobody moved.

Harry started to doubt his own senses; he questioned what was actually happening around him? Perhaps nothing was really happening at all, just a few weird sounds from the sea and the creaking wood of the boat, perhaps a whale that had got to close. Strange things happen at sea, he thought, and over active minds can blow things out of all proportion, causing strange things to happen, or at least imagining that strange things are happening, when really there is a logical explanation. Harry had started to convince himself that everything was fine, although that seed of doubt remained. His heart still raced, his chest rising and falling like a grey hound on the dog track, but it begun to ease and the pain in his lungs had begun to subside.

'Perhaps it was a whale,' Harry finally agreed, still whispering.

All was silent.

Johnny's body lay slumped across the seating next to Harry; he lifted his head looking into Harry's hazel brown eyes searching for solace. It was there; the comforts of an arced smile and settled complexion. Johnny returned the smile; it was almost infectious, as though Johnny had read Harry's mind, both of them equally embarrassed, to think that they could have blown a few sounds, out of all proportion.

They began to right their bodies, pushing down on the seating, returning to a seated position, laughing out load, at the back of the boat.

'I'll tell you what Johnny, that's what its all about.'

'What? Scaring myself half to death, you mean.' Harry could tell that what it was about was a little bit too out there for Johnny.

'Ye Johnny could you feel the rush?'

'Yes I could, but I don't want to feel it again. What do you say we call it a night, get back in there, apologise to Grandpa. Come on Johnny, it's not even midnight, we've been out here less than an hour, he can't be that angry and if we take it together…'

Harry thought for a moment, it had been a good night after all. It nearly scared him to death, he had got the adrenaline rush he was looking for, the only thing missing was a few fish, and they could wait for another day.

'Okay Johnny, you're right, enough is enough. Isn't it amazing how a story like that can bring out a real buzz,' Harry laughed, patting Johnny on the arm.

'You can keep your buzzes Camponara, it's too much excitement for me.' Johnny's became more serious, 'You do realise that we are in deep do do for this don't you?'

'Nothing new there, then.'

'Seriously Harry, I'm still a bit unnerved being out tonight, what do ya say, get the boat started and let's get out of here.'

Harry smiled, grasping the outboard steering column in one hand and the chord in the other. His body turned slighted to the right with the chord handle in hand ready to pull.

Suddenly there was a loud splash; Harry's head tilting instinctively to the sound, his eyes wide like saucers and jaw dropped as

if shocked. Two black feet in the air, disappearing into the blackness of the sea, water, white froth and black, falling back behind him. It was Johnny; he had gone. Harry moved quickly to the side of the boat, only to see the swell gathering over, covering the existence of Johnny, as if he had never been. Harry filled with despair, fear, selfish thoughts that this was greater than any trouble he had ever been in before. For a second, he thought he could hear the old man's voice crying out to them. But it could not be, Harry thought, surely they were too far away in the darkness for him to see anything. Harry's breathing became quick and shallow; he thought he was having a panic attack, as his hands trembled beneath the surface of the water desperately. All the time a fear inside him, that he too might be dragged in, but it couldn't stop him from touching it, his loss was almost too great, it was as if, he had drowned him himself or wished he had.

Harry slumped back onto the side of the boat whimpering, consumed by a feeling of hopelessness. Nothing but silence surrounded him eerily, he had no rush to move, he did not care what happened to him now, the guilt had crushed him, he had just lost his best friend, his only friend.

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CHILDREN OF THE SUMMER'S END

by Sam Dawson

Cool. An all black tent. Never seen one of those before. Someone must have put it up last night, just behind mine. Nothing unusual there, I decided. People arrive at all hours at festivals, though when they stick up their tents in the dark it's usually with a maximum of noise and confusion. Anyway, did it matter? No it didn't. The day was warm, though not as warm as I'd thought it was just a few minutes before, so it was time for breakfast and, later, to catch a band or two.

I sidled over to Tim's tent, alerted by the irresistible smell to the fact that he was driving any vegetarian neighbours mad by frying bacon. He fixed me with a resigned eye and began to butter an extra sandwich.

Tim was someone I'd met at this same festival four years before, a middle aged bloke whose marriage had, I think, just broken down (I didn't ask), who helped me put up my then girlfriend's new tent, and to whose expertly made fire we gravitated that evening. He camped in the same spot each year: near enough to a large oak tree to take advantage of the microclimate its branches created, but not near enough to have any of them fall on his tent; close enough to the toilets for convenience but not close enough to smell them; and on a slight rise from which water runs, passing his downhill facing doorway, during the occasional downpour. An

informal agreement grew up between us that if there was space when I arrived I'd pitch up next to him, maybe bringing, with my friends, a little bit of a younger outlook, while in return he offered years of festival, camping and, I suppose, life experience.

He could be a bit difficult to shut up, but not that day. I noticed that as he tended the food he was giving the odd backward glance towards the recent arrival.

'New neighbours?' I asked, pointing my chin at the black tent.

'No,' he said, surprisingly firmly, began to say something else, then went uncharacteristically quiet. To revive the conversation I went straight to one of our favourite topics.

'One day in. So who's ascendant this year?'

He brightened at the return of our annual survey. 'Oh, it's definitely students and young toffs on the slum again. It has been ever since they put Glastonbury on the telly and the Telegraph started to print pictures of posho girls in designer bloody wellies. It's the same here. A sea of students and gap yearers, with debs and slebs being choppered in to have their pictures taken standing in a bit of mud.'

'No other contenders? No fightback by any crusties, old farts, new age travellers or the like?'

'Nah, their time has passed. There's not even many people over forty. There's some talk about it actually. A lot of parents went looking for the family camping area when they arrived and were told by the stewards that there wasn't one. Actually there is, but most didn't find it, so they're in with the rest of us. There's been some idiots pissing on their tents and letting off air horns at night. Nothing too unusual there, but when they were politely asked to quiet it down a little because there were little kids sleeping they told the parents to fuck off because people like them don't belong in a festival. I don't remember that ever happening before.'

'So are you feeling lonely?' I was going for a joke, but he took it seriously.

'I'm beginning to. Do you know you don't see a single face that would have been here, say, 10 years ago. Not even the old hippies who'd been coming since the early seventies just to complain

about how much it had changed. It feels like they've been squeezed out. I've never seen it so homogenous before. It's a lesser event because of it.'

'In other words, it's all too commercial. Hengefest? What kind of a name is that? I remember when it was still the Henge Farm Free Festival. When are Hawkwind playing? It's not like the good old days. I hope I die before I get old.'

He granted me a laugh. 'Yeah, yeah. Enjoy the joke while you can. You want to watch out, how many years have you got left before you turn 30? Not many. You'll be next.'

In one of those typical festival cock ups the friends I was meeting with hadn't arrived. The minibus someone had promised could be borrowed couldn't. They would have to make other arrangements and wouldn't show till the next morning. So I wandered the site, confident that I would bump into people I knew and hadn't seen for a few years. But for the first time ever I didn't and, feeling a bit like Tim, I ended up looking for company back at his fire that evening.

As the day died and we smoked and talked I found myself edging closer to the flames. The black tent was between us and the setting sun and, foolish though it was, it felt as though it was drawing some of the light and warmth out of the evening. Acting casual I asked Tim if the occupants had appeared yet.

'Uh-uh.' He sat a camping kettle on the fire, poked the embers for a while, then picked up the subject: 'You know there's something about that tent. I can't put my finger on it, but it reminds me of something years back. There was a sexual predator. He was one of the so called peace convoy and he'd stopped off at one of the peace camps before arriving here. The word was that he'd been getting away with some serious assaults. The women didn't want to report it and the peace protesters were incapable of doing anything about it. They were in the ascendant at the time. It was quite a nice festival back then. A bit po faced, but fairly tolerant. Maybe too tolerant. There was a struggle for the festival's soul between them and his lot, the convoy. They'd nick the sound systems, arrive early and leave late – littering the place with failed buses and all kinds of

rusting shit. The peaceniks used to buy them off. Anyway, when this guy turned up here me and a few others paid him a visit and told him he wasn't welcome. He had one of those yurt tents, nothing like that one,' He jabbed a finger over his shoulder, without looking, pointing to the black one so accurately that I realised he had been watching it a lot, even if he was pretending otherwise, 'and he fucked off pretty sharpish.'

'Your point being?'

'Oh, yeah, that. Well, he was a fairly ordinary looking guy. But his tent just gave you this bad feeling. It may have been because of what I'd heard about it, but it seemed to suck the joy out of the area around it. And something about that black one makes me feel the same way.'

'Or maybe it's just some bad acid you had in the seventies coming back to haunt you. Man.'

The kettle began to steam.

'Maybe it is, but any more of that and you'll be buying your next cup of tea.'

That night was the first time I'd ever slept alone at a festival. I hit my sleeping bag at one in the morning and drifted in and out of sleep, my head still buzzing from dance and drink and place. Meanwhile, with that startling closeness that makes it sound like everyone passing is actually in your tent, the narrative of the festival played on outside:

- 'So he's like 'They were OK' and I'm like, 'Yeah, they were *OK*, but they're not a *headline* band'.'

- 'Trust me'

- 'You are not smoking in *my* tent'

A woman's stifled orgasm.

- 'This is our tent. The green one. Wait a minute. They're *all* green. All green. How cool is that!'

The far away drone of a generator.

'It's this one, I'm telling you.' The sound of a zip, 'Oh sorry mate. Wrong tent. Sorry, sorry.'

And among the gobbets of conversation, the Dark Side of the Moon disjointed voices self-aggrandisingly answering questions

you never heard put, almost too quiet to catch, a child sobbing.

It woke me. The temperature had dropped and I pulled the sleeping bag up round my ears and watched the shadows being thrown onto the tent wall by the distant arc lamps at the toilets. Shapes flickered. Some were defined silhouettes, others were huge and looming blobs, depending on their distance from the lights. None were child sized. Even as I was thinking about what to do next, I fell asleep.

What woke me next wasn't noise, but its absence. Outside there was movement without sound. On the tent wall, shadows flitted. Insubstantial, semi-transparent, low. I reached for the torch I kept handy as an improvised weapon and, making far more noise than I intended, began to wriggle out of my sleeping bag. Then the whole tent tautened, jerked and thrummed like a plucked guitar string - and my heart did the same. A drunk had tripped over one of the guyropes. I heard him giggle, hiccup and move off, then a grunt as he did it to someone else. His retreating shadow was reassuringly solid. Those that weren't had skittered away at his approach. But from the direction they took I could guess which tent they'd returned to.

Festivals are weird sometimes. That's why you go.

I was bumming another cooked breakfast off Tim when my friends arrived, including Abby, who I was rather hoping would be sharing my tent by that evening. I liked to think that me being there was what had persuaded her to come. I hadn't counted on her bringing a group of student friends along with her.

There were five of them. Three female, two male, the latter clearly there in the hope of getting into the pants of the former.

As Tim began the complicated exercise of making tea for so many people, Jamie, the rather weedy lead bloke, began to hold forth. They were, it turned out, all doing Media Studies, which meant we had to listen to a shallow analysis of how 'the meejah' was run by a tiny cabal to keep the masses docile. Despite this they all expected to soon be youth and reality TV presenters.

Tim stayed heroically silent until Jamie pulled out a copy of The Inexplicable: For Those Seeking the Truth. From it he read a

long article about the festival site, including its ancient stone ring, which no cattle would ever enter, the mysterious objects seen in the sky, human sacrifices, and – here he lowered his voice for maximum effect – the fact that no birds ever nested or flew there.

It was when one of the girls, fired up by this, pointed to the sky and said she'd seen something disappear that Tim gave up the struggle to hold his tongue. 'It's called a plane,' he told her. 'It went behind a cloud. They do that. If you look it will reappear right about….now in fact. The ancient ring around which millennia's worth of mysteries have woven themselves is actually a folly built in the 1890s by a local landowner. It has a fence around it which is why the cattle don't enter it. And if you trust to objective observation rather than that,' he pointed to the magazine, then to the air, then cupped his ear, 'you will hear crows cawing and birds singing. Christ. The only inexplicable thing is how anyone can believe that rubbish over the evidence of their own eyes and ears.'

He looked sorry as soon as he said it, even before they got sulkily up, almost as one, to find somewhere else to camp. I tried to smooth things over and persuade them to stay, but it was no good, he had too accurately pissed on their fireworks. As they went Abby threw me a look over her shoulder. Half an invitation to join them, half regret that I'd already blown it. I could have gone. It would have meant abandoning Tim though. I told myself that, while it might not be right to walk out on a friend for the sake of a shag, he surely wouldn't mind if I did.

But *I'd* mind.

Bollocks.

'I'm sorry, mate. I didn't mean to come between you and your lady,' he told me when they'd gone. 'You should go after them. Don't stick with me. They're the majority now, you're better off with them than against them.'

I grumpily asked him what he meant, when what I should have been asking was why he couldn't keep his big mouth shut.

'You know already,' he said, 'We discuss it every year. Whose festival this is. Who makes it in their image. The hippies had it first. Later it shrunk to a much smaller event for greens and pagans.

After a few years they lost it to the peace protesters when Cruise came along and it was plain it was ready to expand and make money. The peace convoy nearly robbed it off them for a while but they lost out and it began to generate so much money that you got organised crime moving in on the drugs and taking protection money from the stallholders. Now they've largely been squeezed out by online booking, fences and the new majority: the people you see around you. The ones who think they're the first people ever to go to a festival. The ones who want nothing more from it than to be shown in the audience on the telly. The expensively educated ones who somehow know fuck all about history, or politics, or anything much else, and yet never stop gobbing off about just those things. And like everyone else they'll remake this event in their own image. Don't forget that there are now more people going to more festivals than ever before. This one is maybe fifty times bigger than when it started. The communal mind is in charge, mate. The collective semi-consciousness. It's happened before. Music and torches and mythology. Back then they called it the triumph of the will. Different tunes, same phenomenon.'

There was a minute's silence as he finished with that rhetorical flourish. He looked at me as if expecting approval. I disappointed him. 'Tim, I've fucking had enough. I'm going to listen to some music and have some fun. As I remember that used to be why people came to festivals.'

I wandered off bad temperedly and it wasn't till much later, when I found myself watching the sun drop and enjoying the signature smells of spilt cider, wood fires and sun-baked earth that I began to take in who and what I was passing. Which was how I came to find Abby and her friends in their newly chosen camping spot.

Of course I sat with them, trying not to do a Tim and notice the poorly put up tents, which wouldn't stay put if there was a good wind, or the smoky, failing fire made of green wood pointlessly cut by one of them who was – truly the The Sign of The Prick – wearing a hatchet in a sheath on his belt.

I don't know if it was paranoia or not, but I felt that they were

watching me for any signs of separateness, cynicism or other thoughtcrime. Even Abby seemed to have joined the joint scrutiny of my attitude.

One of the girls, white, with dreadlocks, was holding forth. 'It's so awesome. Don't you think we're tapping into the power of this place, with its thousands of years of history? Don't you feel at one with it? Like together we're healing the bad that people have done to the earth. Avenging the ecological insult.'

I thought instead of what Tim had said. How for several years there'd be a dominant theme: the hippies, greens, bikers, the sudden influx of machete carrying dealers. Now it's mainly students and hoorays. Who believe all the mystic guff and buy crystals and authentic Chinese-made Native American dreamcatchers. Convinced that the little Victorian stone circle henge that gives the event its name is a key to timeless wisdom, while around them people are planting sound systems and generators in the sides of the genuine barrows and digging latrines into the ancient field systems. Maybe Tim had a point. The beliefs of so many people, accurate or not, potentially had power. I didn't go for his hint that when an expulsion occurred it was the will of the festival, but I didn't completely reject the idea of a collective unconsciousness. I just thought that mob mentality was a better name for it.

As I drifted back to the campfire conversation the girl had stopped talking just long enough for Jamie to butt in. I willed myself to listen and learn, shocked at the realisation that I had less in common with them, only a few years younger than me, than with Tim, who was decades older. I managed to adopt a neutral expression as Jamie told them all that a massive terrorist biological attack that would wipe out London was a certainty. When one of the others said that he'd survive the post attack anarchy and infected, scavenging hordes by ordering like masses of throwing stars and like hundreds of weapons on eBay I declined to ask how exactly his purchases would be made and delivered in the midst of total societal breakdown. One of them then postulated what would happen if the infection created a plague of zombies ('28 Days Later zombies. Not the old fashioned kind'), but, puffing himself up in

front of the women said he'd be OK because he knew how to make a petrol bomb. I resisted the temptation to point out that he meant Hungarian when he told us he'd learned this from a film on the 'Czech uprising' at college ('Yeah. Anytime we want to we can go to the Media Studies Suite and watch movies. How. Cool. Is. That.'). I even reminded myself that I didn't know that when he went on to tell us that that vodka is Russian for little water and he'd seen a statistic that in the Soviet Army in World War Two every soldier drank a litre of it a day. See, I told myself, you didn't know that did you, clever dick? Just because they're younger and more talkative than you it doesn't mean they can't teach you something.

'Yeah,' he continued, 'a litre a day. No wonder they lost.'

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Like an old fashioned News of the Screws reporter, I made my excuses and left, heading for the silent disco. I knew these were a recent innovation – which got around licence conditions dictating when the music had to stop by playing it through wireless headphones – but hadn't yet been friendless enough to use one as entertainment at one in the morning. It was in a marquee, where a mass of people moved in silence through shadow and pools of purple UV, heads down, arms up, lost in inaudible rhythms. At the door a girl in a high-vis vest, like the others dancing in perfect synchronisation to a beat I couldn't hear, gave me a glorious, spaced out smile, and handed me a pair of headphones. I took them and headed laboriously through the crush towards the centre of the room, before putting them on and hearing…

silence.

The switch was set to On, the little LED glowed red but there was nothing to hear. Resigned, I headed back towards the door, weaving between the other dancers, at first echoing their movements to avoid collisions and then, as I began to enjoy guessing the beat they were hearing and I wasn't, swaying accordingly. As I passed them they smiled at me. One or two even flashed a thumbs up sign. I basked in the warmth of acceptance, glad that I had come

here after all.

'Not working,' I mimed to the girl at the entrance, pointing at the headphones. Beatifically she took a new pair from the box and handed them to me. I waved thanks to her as she closed her eyes and returned to her dance, then began to again push towards the middle of the tent. Where I put them on. And they didn't work. Oh fuck this. I made my way back to the desk, slightly irritated that when I finally caught the girl's attention she still didn't take her own headphones off. Again I signalled that they weren't working. She stopped dancing long enough to remove hers and try mine, instantly resuming her dance when she did so. I tried hers. Silent. Maybe I shouted it too loudly, 'These don't work either', maybe I didn't, but either way I swear that something changed in that tent. When I dared to glance behind me everyone had stopped. They were staring at me, united in hostility. At the interruption, or at something else? Whichever it was, the damage was clearly irrecoverable. I went straight out the door. As the flap closed behind me I looked back. They had all resumed their trancelike dancing.

I think I had just been declared unmutual.

That night I heard the voices again. First a child. Then someone who sounded like Tim. Both muffled as if by great distance. I crept out of the tent and heard nothing. Waited. Still nothing. Went back inside. Tried to sleep. Slept. Then woke up with a start. Had someone just called for help? I sat bolt upright and listened to silence. After five minutes I laid down and caught just the end of a despairing plea. Sat up again. And heard nothing. And so the night passed and it wasn't till the morning that I realised that anything I had heard, I had heard through the ground. But by then I had something else to worry about.

There was a circle of emptiness around me. Everyone for thirty feet around had packed up and gone elsewhere.

There was just my tent and the black one. Tim's had gone.

This wasn't right. The ashes of his fire hadn't been buried and covered over with the turf he'd set aside when he first made it. There were still a couple of tentpegs stuck in the ground, the way sloppy new festivalgoers leave them – but not Tim. I looked around

for someone to ask. In the distance I could see queues already beginning for the toilets and the water tap, and could smell cooking from the vendors' area. But around me there was no one. I couldn't shake the idea that behind each zipped entrance and mesh window there were people keeping quiet, watching or listening for what I did next, willing me to take the only possible step. And check out the black tent.

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Its zip, colder than it should have been on that morning, opened easily and I crawled in. It was empty. No light penetrated its darkened flysheet. My eyes went up over the inside of the fabric, which is why it took me a minute to register that there was no groundsheet. The floor was scrubby grass and soil. Featureless. Or was it? I searched it with my hands and found a hard ridge of earth. As my eyes adjusted I could see it was a strange horizontal gash running the six foot length of the oval interior. Almost like a face. Without eyes, without nose, with just a huge…

Then the tent woke to my presence, the zip closed behind me and in the floor, the mouth opened.

***

I live in blackness. Hunched. Hungry. Cold. Surviving on fungi and tree roots and the water that collects on them. Sometimes shouting uselessly in despair. I am in a tiny pocket of space in the earth, whose few features I know only from what I can discover with my fingertips. I suspect that there are others down here, in other deep, hidden holes separated from my own by tons of soil. I think that some of the children who have passed beyond the stage of yelling for help are allowed up top to forage for food. What they have found will be pushed into my grasp by a small hand that will instantly retract into one of the little tunnels that touch tells me dot this coffin-sized space that is now my home.

The one thing there is plenty of, apart from soil and darkness,

is time to think. To learn to feel at one with the earth. Part of the whole. Up above the people who did this to us have discovered the same belonging. If they faced up to what has been done they'd no doubt say that it was some ancient power belonging to this place that buried us alive. But I think that it's their common will that has actually made it into what they most wanted it to be, a genuine, sentient, mystical site. Which happens to be tired of their ill treatment and noise and hedonism. A site that is now giving strength to their interred victims: the children who woke them at 7am when they wanted to sleep after partying all night, the tent thieves, the nonconformists and sceptics like Tim and I, who, very soon, are going to be paying them a group visit.

The festival is now long over and no noise or vibration disturbs the crushing walls of total blackness that hem me in. My clothes have rotted and my eyes atrophied but I haven't forgotten how I came to be down here.

The more time I spend, alone, cut off from the light, the more I sense others in the earth. Even the dead, their bones tumbled into barrows and ancient burial pits.

There are almost enough of us now. The day is coming soon when we will be pushed forth again. Given birth. Our tattered clothes will be stripped by the passage to the surface and when we arrive among you, sleeping in your tents or sitting around your campfires, we'll be dressed only in the dirt and vegetation we clawed through to reach you. You'll know us by our mud-crusted hair and shattered nails, by our pigmentless skin, and by the turf and brambles clinging to our skeletal bodies. Some of us may have crowns of thorns. And some of us will be sure to wear some flowers in our hair.

Wait, was that something? It was! The faintest tremor of a lorry far above, heavy, maybe carrying a generator or lighting rig. I twist my now emaciated body, and grind my mouth against the nearest rat sized hole to whisper into it. Brothers, sisters. They're coming back. Summer's end is near. It's festival time again! Soon they'll be arriving in their cars and coaches and minibuses; smug and safe and sure of themselves.

They think they've got rid of people like us and made themselves the perfect festival. They think it's all over.

It is now.

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THE SHADOW IN THE STACKS

by Daniel McGachey

I don't know if I've spoken before of my old friend, Dr. Lawrence, the folklorist. It was he whose researches took him, some years back now, to the library of Saint Montague's, one of our older and, I must add, more forgotten colleges.

The library itself dates back several centuries and houses many original texts that in other, more conveniently situated and oft-frequented libraries, had become lost or damaged over the years, while others manuscripts were peculiar to that area. As such, they were jealously guarded and, with the college reluctant to the point of rudeness to entrust them beyond their own precincts, Lawrence was forced to decant himself and his studies to rooms within that locale, allowing him daily access to the treasured tomes.

The nearest settlement, Greymarsh, is hardly the most inviting town for visitors. But Lawrence being Lawrence, this was entirely to his liking. 'If I am to gather the fables and folk tales of antiquity,' he would declare, 'it's better to have the truth of it and not some sanitised version that has been formulated to please tourists.'

And, doubtless you are now imagining that one of these ancient volumes yielded some tale of long buried horror, which I now intend to share. In which case, I should tell you that, while long buried is an apt description, this wasn't a tale to be found

within the pages of any book.

In his capacity as a visiting scholar, Dr. Lawrence had developed a fine working relationship with a Mr. Perdew, one of the assistant librarians. It was he who entrusted him with the somewhat fantastical story Lawrence passed onto me and which I now intend to recount.

His researches had been proceeding apace, in many ways thanks to Perdew's excellent knowledge of the library's stock. Still a young man, Perdew had retained the enthusiasm of youth but, through experience had developed the wonderful knack of knowing just when to display an interest or offer an opinion on Lawrence's work and when to hold back and allow the doctor to pursue more solitary trains of thought.

It was only when he expressed a desire to seek out certain of the more elderly texts, some obscure parish records from early in the previous century which were not kept on display among the main collection, that Lawrence saw Perdew's affable eagerness to help falter.

He seemed somewhat reluctant, a little vague about where the records may be kept, while all the time his eyes kept flitting toward a door in the far corner that, as Lawrence had already learned, led to a basement stock room. He hummed and hawed and said he'd see what he could do, all with the intent of putting the scholar off his goal, it seemed.

Baffled, Lawrence chided, 'Come now, man. You're not afraid to go rooting about in the cellars, surely?'

At this, Perdew bridled, his face beetrooting as he seized a key from behind the desk and made for the door with a determined step, one which became decidedly less determined as he neared the doorway.

For a few moments he stood, the key held out toward the lock. Yet he did not press it home and turn it. It was only as Lawrence approached to enquire if he was all right that he realised the assistant librarian was trembling, his entire body shaking as though a current of electrical power were passing through it.

He scarce seemed to notice as Lawrence gripped his shoulders

and led him back to a seat, prising the key from his numb fingers. There was no doubt that he was in a state of terror and, once his eyes showed a flicker of recognition toward Lawrence, the doctor gently pressed him to tell the cause of his distress.

'Perhaps I must, Dr. Lawrence, sir,' he admitted, weakly. 'And, as I know you to be a man of honour, I can trust you.'

'Of course,' Lawrence assured him. 'You may speak freely of anything in front of me.'

What he told Lawrence, he said, was something he had never previously spoken to anyone of for fear of losing his position or of being accused of losing his grip on reality. It was an incident he recalled from a few years earlier, not many years after he had taken his post in the library.

'All had been well and I was as content in my job as any man could hope to be,' he revealed. 'Until one cold morning as I arrived outside these doors, ready to open up for the morning's students, only to find the place full of activity and my way barred.'

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'Something's happened, sir. A disturbance in the night! I don't know that I should let you in.' The old porter, a man named Gordon, though I was never entirely able to work out whether this was his Christian name or surname, was clearly agitated as he placed up signs alerting the students to the unexpected closure of the library.

'No-one's been hurt?' I queried. 'There has been no fire? The walls aren't set to come tumbling down?'

Mr. Gordon shrugged as though incidents of fire, flood or the very crack of doom were little concern of his.

'Then I really must be let past. There are certain rare and irreplaceable volumes which I must see are made secure.'

'They haven't been taken,' the porter said, with heavy meaning. 'If you are referring to…' and here, the fellow became conspiratorial, bringing his bewhiskered face closer to my ear, as if he imagined that any of the chattering students that thronged past

would pay two college employees the slightest notice. 'If you are referring to those… Items Of Uncertain and Curious Origin, Mr. Perdew. Them ones what came out of the pit?'

As anyone remotely connected with the college, indeed, practically every soul on the entire campus and in the surrounding villages, could not help but be aware, the recent renovation work in the library cellars had turned up something, as Gordon liked to put it, of uncertain and curious origin.

There is a corner of the cellar which the students have, as far back as I remember, referred to as 'the haunted crypt', insisting that the air in that spot carries 'the chill of the tomb' and that strange noises, scrabblings and scratchings might be heard there. And, even though no student now had access to the cellars since they had become the storeroom for some of our rarer volumes, the rumours persisted, as such stories frequently do. It was here that the discovery was made.

Workmen, brought in by the Dean to begin construction on a new annexe that he planned to have named in his own honour, had been persuaded to raise a few flagstones in the cellar and satisfy the Chief Librarian's assertions that the chill and the sounds could be explained by the presence of a subterranean stream… possibly even a centuries-old sewer, dating back to the time of the ancient castle onto whose ruins the college had been grafted.

Much had been whispered, in the day or so since then, about the odd parcel that was found in the dry hollow which occupied the space my superior had assumed a stream to be located. On my way to my rooms, as twilight gathered the previous evening, I heard mutterings of treasure, of a hidden chamber, even of a human skull.

But the truth of what was found there was neither as spectacular nor as straightforward.

'Books? Is that all? But we have books already! It is a library, after all!' The Dean had been summoned within minutes of the find but, even in this short space of time, rumours had begun circulating and, judging by his dissatisfaction, he'd already been rather taken with the notion of a treasure chest. 'Was there nothing else?' he urged, hopefully.

'Apparently not, Professor Clark,' I informed him, to his ill-concealed displeasure. 'Just these half dozen volumes, found in a sort of oilskin sack, according to the foreman.'

'They're ugly enough,' he muttered, then, straining to lift them, he added, 'and heavy enough.' And, as he turned the pages the look of annoyance grew, mingled with a hint of incomprehension. 'What gabble is this?' His finger jabbed at the rows upon rows of cramped figures. 'Is that even writing? Worthless!' And, with a scowl, he threw the book carelessly into a heap with the others.

'Actually, sir,' I gasped, swiftly examining the leathery brown binding for damage, 'judging by their age and condition, I think these may prove to be of inestimable value.'

Professor Clark's piggy eyes lit up in the folds between his bulging cheeks and his coppery, unkempt eyebrows. 'Valuable, you say? Then what are you leaving them lying around for? Have them put under lock and key. Grief, man, there are common labourers and Lord knows who else swarming through here.' He was still talking even as the door swung shut behind him, 'Tell the Librarian to come see me whenever he sees fit to return.' And he had departed happily, his greedy little heart full of joy.

That had been the day before and our next encounter was less joyful.

The local sergeant and a constable had arrived by bicycle, which was a sight easier than a horse and carriage to navigate through the twisting avenues of the university. As my fellow assistants looked on aghast at the tumbled volumes and scattered pages, I spied the Dean, the Bursar, the Chief Librarian and these policemen sitting opposite the white haired night porter, Gordon. None of them looked happy with whatever Gordon was telling them.

It was the Dean who noticed me first. 'Perdew! Over here! Sharply, now!'

What followed was an interrogation. What time had I left the library? Had the books been locked away? Where had I gone? Had anyone been loitering? Was the building securely locked?

'Who else knew of the discovery?' demanded the Sergeant.

'Practically everyone. It was all round the college.'

'But who had actually seen the objects?'

'Only the Dean himself, the workmen, the other assistants… oh, yes, and old Harkwell.'

'An outsider?' croaked the Dean. 'You showed these valuable artefacts to an outsider? And why was this man informed?'

As I explained, a swiftly despatched note, entrusted to the care of a fleet-footed first year, had brought the equally swift arrival of Mr. Harkwell.

The old bookbinder had been called upon many times over the last fifty years, when overly rough student handling had caused the books to buckle and burst. Although near blinded by age, his knowledge of the various bindings and papers were so ingrained that he could tell, by smell and touch, just the right materials.

But, even this expert craftsman was at a loss. 'The texture, it's not leather, I am almost convinced,' he muttered, fingers caressing the spine and cover of the smallest volume, which he rotated under his prominent nose, like a man savouring the smell of a fine cigar. 'There's a certain familiarity about the smell but, as loathe as I am to be defeated after all these years, I must admit it, Perdew.'

The old craftsman looked so crestfallen by his failure that I felt duty bound to offer some measure of dignity back to him, insisting that I had all faith that he would find the answer and bundling him off with the small tome on which he might continue his researches.

'You wish me to take this? You're entrusting it to me?' he asked in a mixture of surprise and delight. 'You are a scholar, Mr. Perdew. Something of which this college is sadly in short supply.'

'But,' quaked the Dean, as I explained my reasons for summoning the bookbinder, 'Can this man be trusted?'

I almost laughed at the notion of the eighty-seven year old Harkwell running rampage through the library. Fearing I may be reduced to helpless mirth, I asked to be excused to help attend to the tidying up.

'Yes, you may go,' the Sergeant replied, looking suddenly weary. 'I doubt if this old… if this gentleman has anything to say that might interest you.'

I was somewhat surprised. 'I've always found Mr… er… Gordon most helpful.'

'My thanks, Mr. Perdew, sir,' the old porter lifted his cap to his head specifically so that he could doff it in my direction. 'That is my aim, to help in the smooth running of the college and its faculties and facilities.'

The Sergeant sneered. 'Helpful, eh? All right, then. Tell this gentleman what you witnessed, then. Let's see how helpful he finds it.'

The old man shrugged. 'I don't know as I'd say that I'd actually witnessed it, sir, as I couldn't rightly attest that I saw anything too clearly. Rather, it was what I'd say was in the nature of an impression that I had.

'That queer, unsettling sensation that some strange eye was regarding me gave me cause to turn my head sharply… though, perhaps, I might be glad that I wasn't sharp enough to catch full sight of what I believe to have been behind me.

'The impression I had was of something crawling just out of sight, into the darkness. Something that was red and peculiarly glistening. Red and wet, like something that you might see in a butcher's display…'

It was at this point that the Sergeant lost control of his temper and, in language I won't repeat here, questioned the college's policy of employing soft-headed individuals obviously in their dotage. Gordon, paying no heed to the insult, merely said, 'My people is country people and, in the country, if you want to eat meat, you got to prepare the carcass first an' that's what I was put in mind of. That was my impression. But then, before I could think more on it, I saw the mess in here and raised the alarm.'

The Sergeant left soon afterwards, his mind seemingly set on the notion of high-spirited students indulging in a spot of vandalism and obviously unwilling to expend any further concern on the matter, opining that it was an issue for the college to deal with internally and, if he had any advice to offer, violently.

The authorities may have lost interest, but the same could not be said of the students and, by the time we had restored some sem-

blance of order and could reopen the doors, a considerable crowd flocked in, many of whom I had never once spied lifting a book, let alone setting foot within the library. That long day consisted mainly of fielding the same questions about the disturbance, while also having to politely listen to a variety of theories to the nature of the criminal. 'Only a ghost could have entered without opening the window,' was one. Another was, 'Whatever it was that came out of the ground, it wasn't alone!'

By six o'clock, that night, I was exceptionally tired of the students and their comments and was so looking forward to closing up for the night that I eagerly cantered after a fellow I glimpsed disappearing amongst the stacks, with an, 'Excuse me, sir, but we're closed,' on my lips.

'Chasing shadows, are we, Perdew?' smirked a younger colleague of mine, adding, as I looked blankly at him, 'There are no students here. I saw the last one out not five minutes ago and I've locked the door against any last minute browsers.'

He was right. There was no-one else to be seen, apart from my fellow assistants, slotting books on shelves or extinguishing the lamps in the reading rooms. The row into which I had been about to follow the figure was empty.

'A shadow,' I agreed… but, if that was so, why had it seemed so… so red?

I spoke nothing of this to my colleagues, convincing myself that some delayed shock from the morning's excitement had triggered my imagination, as it had certainly heightened my own curiosity. As I bade the others a good evening and began my routine check of the locks… though the action was considerably less routine on this night… my mind turned once more to the unearthed and seemingly unearthly books.

Had the damage done here been wrought by someone who desired them? Was it someone who perhaps knew their origin and the significance of the strange inscriptions that filled the pages? And how determined was this seeker to claim his prize? Would the locked safe in the library office stand in his way? Indeed, would anything or anyone come between it and its quarry?

'It'? Surely I meant 'Him'?

I was suddenly keenly aware that I was alone in the darkened room where the very objects this possibly mad intruder sought were to be found. I didn't linger beyond the time it took to grab my hat and overcoat and make my way to the main door. But, before I had reached for the door handle, my heart had leapt into my mouth at the sudden loud rapping on the window and the dark shape that waited beyond the frosted glass.

My breath was escaping in bursts and gasps. 'Who..?'

'Mr. Perdew?' came the muffled voice, 'I've a message for you. The lady said it was urgent.'

It was a student, wrapped in scarves and mittens against the chill, who placed into my still trembling hand a note, summoning me to Harkwell's home above his workshop. Normally I savoured these visits, as the old fellow's bookshelves carried many well-preserved volumes even older than some in the library, and his collection filled both his house and his shop. Each visit felt like a chance to step back into an almost forgotten world, but the grim look on the messenger's face left me with uneasy thoughts as I hastened into town and through the winding streets.

My fears were confirmed when I saw the distraught housekeeper, who hurriedly beckoned me in upon my first knock, and up the worn and narrow staircase. 'Oh, Mr. Perdew, sir, but I don't know what to tell you or where to start with it but I should warn you before you see him, sir. I'd be remiss if I didn't.'

'Warn me, Mrs. Trenchard?' I asked, nervous of what I may hear in reply. 'Warn me of what?'

'He's not…' Here, that good woman paused, fussing to tidy her usually immaculate grey hair as she struggled to find the right words to answer. 'Well, you may not know him. He may not make any sense.'

'Mrs. Trenchard, it's you who isn't making sense. Not know him? I've known old Hark… I've known Mr. Harkwell for years.'

She gave me a look of almost sympathy. 'Not like this, you've not. Dr. Harlstane says it was a fit or the like. His heart's not strong enough to go moving him but he was determined to see you. Wrote

your name, what I could read of it, his hand trembling so.'

'Wrote it?' I demanded, my anxiety and puzzlement growing by the second. 'Can't he speak?'

Mrs Trenchard's reply was a piteous wail. 'Oh, sir, to see him! And him only eighty-seven!'

The reason for the housekeeper's distress became obvious as she opened the creaking door on a dimly lit room and pointed a shaking hand to what I, at first, took to be an empty bed, heaped with discarded linen.

Then I saw the pallid face amongst the folds and heard the voice that attempted to speak. 'Per… dew… Lost… Gone…'

I rushed to the bedside. 'Mr. Harkwell, what has happened to you? How can I possibly help you?'

Again he croaked, 'Lost… tried to stop… book… red… so red…' Though his voice was weak, his grip was strong and he grasped my hand, guiding it onto a bundle of fabric. I recognised it as the cloth I had used to wrap that small volume in when I had presented it to him the day before. 'Gone...'

Then the realisation of what Harkwell was trying to tell me struck home. 'The book? Someone has taken it? Should the police be summoned?'

Harkwell let loose a howl that tapered off into a weak cough. He shook his head, vigorously protesting against the thought of the police. I could get no more from him and made to close the door and leave him to his rest.

His arm raised up to me, pleading. 'Light… Please… Not dark…'

'I'll open the curtains,' I told him, horrified by the look of fear in his bleary eyes. 'Will that help? Just a little, for you must rest.'

As I allowed the remaining weak sunlight into the room, his eyes darted, seeking out every corner, as though he didn't entirely trust every shadow to fully retreat.

Finally, satisfied, he sank back into a fitful slumber and I left him to sleep.

Mrs Trenchard, looking somewhat more composed and back to her normal, no-nonsense self, with only the red rims round her eyes

to let slip the strain she was obviously under, was waiting for me in the hallway. 'I found him when I came on up this morning,' she told me, leading me to the door of Mr. Harkwell's inner sanctum. 'In here.'

The scene that was revealed made me gasp, though it was one that was all too familiar. 'His study! His books…'

The housekeeper indicated a clearing amidst the debris. 'Lying amongst them, I found him. He must've brung them all down upon himself when he took his tumble.'

The room was awash with papers and books that I had always seen lovingly presented and preserved. It was as though a storm had blown itself into being in the room and spent its wrath on the books and their bookcases, before dying away.

'Such a mess,' Mrs Trenchard grumbled, shaking her head, 'and where I'm to start with it, I don't begin to know.'

I picked up one of the scattered books. Its spine was twisted, its leather binding half wrenched off and there were some rusty stains on the pages, dried but unmistakable. 'Blood?' I muttered.

I hadn't been conscious that I'd said the word aloud but the housekeeper spoke up then, saying, 'If it is, it's not his, thank the Heavens and All who dwell There. He had a bruise or two but no cuts.

'Unless,' her voice rose in alarm, 'there was someone else here? Some burglar who attacked the old Mister? I heard there's them what's after rare books lose in the area.'

'News does travel.' I said to myself, knowing full well that nothing escaped the ear of Mrs Martha Trenchard. 'But could anyone have gotten in? Was there any sign of a break in?'

'Apart from himself and the mess, all was as it should be. But, if there had been someone else…' She paused, a troubled look fixed upon her face, leading me to prompt her to continue, which she did reluctantly.

'If he'd surprised someone in the dark, here, it would explain the feeling I had when I'd found him on the floor here… That, if he'd had the strength, if he'd had the voice, he would have been screaming!'

It was clear that someone desperately wanted those peculiar volumes, to have attempted robbery at both the library and in the bookbinder's home. Whoever it was had now achieved partial success. The book Harkwell had been working with was gone. My first instinct was to discover why these books were so keenly sought. If there was some clue to be found amongst those ostensibly jumbled scribblings, I had to at least try to locate it. I had to see just what it was we had set loose in unearthing them.

I returned to the library through darkening streets made even more gloomy by my own mood. From the safe in the office, I chose a volume at random, before carefully locking the others away.

My eyes were aching within minutes of trying to decipher the cramped writing that filled the pages, but in time, I confirmed a suspicion, that the garbled text was a mixture of languages, some Latin, some Greek, Anglo Saxon, even Danish and runic. I had a hard task ahead of me but I was equipped with both a library's worth of textbooks to verify the more obscure languages and a healthy dose of stubbornness.

But, even amongst these alien phrases, there was a name that I recognised, which leapt out of the page. Startled, I whispered to myself, 'I've heard of you, 'Nicholas Hobsgate'!

'So these books belonged to that ancient sinner? The worst of men.'

***

It is here that Dr. Lawrence interrupted Mr. Perdew's narrative, for the assistant librarian was not alone in recognising that unsavoury name. 'The worst of men? Your description says little yet succeeds in saying it all. As an antiquarian, I have certainly encountered Sir Nicholas Hobsgate before, though not, I'm very happy to say, in person.

'Indeed, it is rather difficult not to have encountered 'Old Nick' when researching this town's past. I've seen his name in print many a time, in other places, scored through, as if some would hope to erase his name, to edit him and his deeds from the town's past.

'From what my own researches have found, from what little has survived censorious hands through the centuries, Hobsgate was by inheritance, the lord of the manor… by reputation, a necromancer, a black magician of vilest habits, a murderer and defiler of tombs. Though I doubt this was even the half of it!'

Perdew nodded, scarcely attempting to hide his revulsion at the mention of the name. 'It's a better world for the fact that he's been in his tomb these past two centuries. I just wish his notebooks, for lack of a better term, had been buried with him and hadn't surfaced from where he'd obviously concealed them in the bowels of his castle. But they had…'

And, with what Lawrence could only describe as a wearily haunted look clouding his eyes, Mr. Perdew resumed his account.

***

Thus it was that I found myself seated in the Chief Librarian's small office after an inordinate amount of time had passed, copying by lamplight some of the more intriguingly obscure passages from the books. All the while, I kept myself company by mumbling and muttering to myself as I read. ''Thus, all of the subject may be used, the fat for candles... the hand of glory... the fluids to be drained... the sk...'

The faraway chiming of twelve broke into my concentration and I was distantly aware of a sudden pang of hunger as, to quote Mr. Poe's poem, 'I pondered weak and weary o'er many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore.'

Like that poem's narrator, I nodded nearly napping… but it was not the sound of a tapping at the chamber door which jolted me back to wakefulness. It was another sound, like footfalls…

Soft, shoeless footsteps, but there was another quality to them. A quiet, wet, sucking sound, as if, with each step, the feet momentarily stuck, congealing, to the floor.

Roused, I lifted my head. Something was perched on the edge of my desk. Something that moved suddenly as my eyes lit upon it… a scuttling, spidery movement, all joints and angles. Though,

by the size and its red, glistening moistness, it seemed more like a crab or something else from the depths of the sea… or the depths of a nightmare, I realised, as I saw the arm that led away from it, sinew and muscle fading back into the darkness beyond the ring of lamplight. I could tell the rest of the figure was there, however, by the glints of teeth and eyes, lipless and lidless.

What I was then aware of was the harsh scrape of a chair on the floor, the sound of my own stumbling footsteps and the thud of books falling to the floor as I tried to steady myself. My voice was a gasp of horror that seemed to issue from somewhere far off. 'No! Please!'

The only reply was a wheezing, wet breath.

Even as I cowered away from it, I could sense that this visitant had no interest in me. It gathered the book from my desk and clasped it to its raw chest. The strange tenderness of this action must have registered through the fog in my mind, as I at once felt a rising wave of nausea and terror that forced me to my feet and away.

Truth to tell, my flight from the midnight library is lost to memory, as is the remainder of that night and whether I slept or paced or raved in my rooms, I have no recollection. What I do recall is finding myself surrounded by the greasy remains of every candle in my possession, which littered every available surface in an attempt to banish every shadow from the place.

It was a knock at the door which brought me to some semblance of sense and, when I could force my shaking hand to turn the key and open the door, there was a familiar face waiting beyond.

'Mr. Harkwell? Are you..? Shouldn't you be resting?' My voice was a whisper, my mouth was dry and I had a sudden thirst. As I sought for water, the old man entered in the wheelchair that had obviously carried him from his front door to mine.

'My good fellow,' he said grimly, 'it is you who looks in need of rest.' And I was suddenly alert to how my unshaven and unkempt appearance was causing him concern.

'Well, I could certainly be resting, after pushing this blessed

wheelchair,' wheezed Mrs Trenchard, though, despite her protests, I could see she was more than happy that Harkwell had mustered the strength to set out on his journey. 'Why you couldn't send for the young gentleman, with his strong legs, instead of having me wheel you this distance…'

'I did send for him, Martha,' the old man rasped. 'The messenger could get no reply. That's why I worried so.' Signalling that he no longer needed her assistance, the old man wheeled himself round the room allowing his housekeeper to take a rest.

His eyes immediately fell on the burnt out candles. 'So, you saw him too, did you?'

I hadn't the energy to pretend otherwise. 'What… who was it?'

Harkwell grimaced. 'Someone who had the misfortune, many years ago, to encounter Sir Nicholas Hobsgate.

'You never examined the diagrams in that book before passing it to me, did you?'

I shrugged. 'I scarcely had time for more than the merest glance.'

Harkwell shivered and had to gesture for Mrs Trenchard to leave him be as she attempted to adjust the travelling blanket around him. 'You didn't see, and I am glad that my eyes are failing from what I could perceive. It was more than enough, seeing glimpses of demons and imps and the tortures of hell listed alongside instructions and ingredients as though it were a grisly magician's cookbook. But, frightful though these creatures were, the image that lodged in my mind was the diagram of the knife and the victim and the instructions on where to cut and where to peel.'

A vague memory of my nocturnal reading bubbled up. 'All of the subject may be used, the fat... the hand... the fluids... the skin... for binding enchantments and sealing their powers...'

Harkwell continued, 'I've read of such practices, of course. Who hasn't? In legends and tales of awful and ancient rituals. But to hold an actual example of it in my own hands… It is more than I ever thought possible in all my years in my craft and more than I would ever wish to again encounter and endure in whatever years

I may have left on this earth.

'That binding that had me so puzzled? Well, before my nocturnal guest made his presence known, I'd made my enquiries and I'd had researches done. I know what it is and that is why I'm glad I've never encountered it before.'

And before he had even told me, the image of that wet, red hand came to my mind and I knew just why this creature sought the books so fiercely.

'If it were left to me,' Harkwell told me, 'I'd put them back, in the dark, where they should've stayed!'

But I didn't have to put them back. That night, I left the remaining volumes in full view in the open safe and the door to the office unlocked. I didn't need to wait. I knew the visitant would claim his goal.

Indeed, even as I turned back to extinguish the lamps, I saw some dark form move rapidly between the office and that corner door and even in the darkness, I saw those white, grinning teeth and the heavy bundle it clutched to itself.

And I also saw where it was no longer raw and red, where brown and wrinkled skin had been pressed and moulded to the form, in rough, ragged patches.

By morning, the books were gone and the library was in uproar yet again. Yet the Dean was a rational man, with no stomach for flights of fancy.

'All this ridiculous talk of ghostly burglars and cursed books among the students must be stopped. This all smacks of some prank to disrupt the building works. Yes, that's it. A prank. Those ridiculous red prints on the safe? The books were placed in the ground by troublemakers with intent to cause the kind of gossip they're now causing. Valuable? They didn't even take the pages, just ripped the covers off! Grief, man, you've been taken in by forgeries. Should the ringleaders be found, they shall be dealt with most severely!'

Thus, our unimaginative Dean concocted his own flight of fancy, which I think he might even have believed, though he did swiftly alter the site of his proposed building works.

As to the hollow in the cellar floor, it was filled in as quickly

as the workers could be summoned to carry out the task. They reported that it had been disturbed, somewhat. That some of the clay had been clawed at; that possibly some subterranean creature had emerged to cover up the entrance to its burrow, for the narrow tunnel beyond the hole had apparently collapsed in on itself.

Something had returned to the darkness.

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As Mr. Perdew's account came to a close, Lawrence felt duty bound to offer him some reassurance. 'It is a remarkable tale, my friend. Though I see why you have chosen not to spread the story.

'But, the pit is sealed; the visitant has what he came back for. You must put these things to the back of your mind, as an unpleasant memory. Can you let fear prey on your mind still?'

He looked at the doctor as if he had failed to grasp the point of anything he had yet been told. 'This isn't fear,' he said. 'Not in the way you mean it.' And he turned toward that corner door beyond which Lawrence could easily believe something might lurk.

'I do not often think of it,' he told the scholar, 'though it sometimes forces its way through in my darkest dreams. I do not even know if it lies down there, cocooned in that hollow beneath the cellar floors, or if it has returned to some other unknown grave. I do not know if it lies easy or if it is awake still. I merely know that I do not want to disturb it further.

'I hope that it has found some peace now and some comfort; that it is at rest now… in its own skin.'

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UNDERSTANDING

By Jason P. Burden

I ain't never really been one for writing stories but it seems to me that time ain't as long as it used to be. Someone's got to know how I got myself in this mess.

Me name's Denny, Jack Denny, the others call me names that ain't worth writing down. I lived down in the city, had done all me life, I'm a grave robber by way of working.

Now I know that you've probably already decided that I must be a bad man to do what I do but that's for you to decide, I aint trying to gain new friends. Nobody wants to be dug up after they've died but then again nobody wants to die. You'd be surprised how much business I get, even in this day and age but I guess that's the way it goes, folks are always being buried and those that ain't need their money. There are some folks who keep an eye out for the death of gentlemen of certain foreign persuasion; these blokes are buried with their wealth so to speak. Mostly it's doctors and their students though, for me that's a fixed rate. Sometimes they want whole bodies, sometimes just parts, they need to learn and I need to drink. It's hard messy work but as long as it don't make the papers the police don't care much. It pays well enough.

I always read the obituaries and keep notes in a small black book, me wooden shovel's always clean, needs to be wooden so as it makes less noise when it hits the coffin. Now this may seem odd

to some but like I say there's a lot of work and that means there's a lot of people trying to take my business, but most folks who have the mind to enquire will find that I'm the best.

Every Friday I'm down the Red Lion Inn trading teeth, spending me money on booze and women; mines not the only trade that makes money out of bad taste. Folk's know that's where I'll be and as much pleasure as there's to be had there's always some work comes my way.

The Red Lion's a big place on the corner of Highgate High Street. The ground floor's the only one that's open to sell beer and the other floors don't tend to rent rooms for longer than one night at a time. Quite cosy down stairs, oak beams across the ceiling and sawdust on the floor. The lamps aren't too bright and there are lots of little corners you can sit and just keep yourself to yourself. I always liked the smell of the place, sort of a cross between cooked meat and warm bread. I never had a bad pint in the Red Lion and the pies were always hot.

It was three Fridays ago that this new fella comes in, me mates go kinda hush and he walks up to me kinda awkward looking. It's obvious he's looking to hire 'cause a copper wouldn't be so meek. So me mates go to one side and tell this fella to buy me a drink and we sit by the fire and talk. He introduced himself as Doctor Thomsk, funny name, odd-looking bloke; thin and kind of gangly, very pale skin. Would've thought he was an albino but his hair was black, black as coal.

We sat by the warm glow and drank a little, the flames threw deep shadows over his face and I could barely look him in the eye. He sat in silence for a while and I waited for him to say his piece. After a while he gave me a plot number and the name of a graveyard. Pokey little place a fair way out of town. I remember thinking it was odd, you see this bone yard don't get many new guests, if you take my meaning, on account of it being older and smaller than most. He was payin and payin don't ask no questions so I took the job and took my leave.

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As you can guess, in my line of work a bloke don't get easily spooked but this job was plenty spooky. It was a filthy night; cloudy and bright but the rain had made the soil plenty wet. Wormin' soil we call it, easy to dig but messy. There was a low iron fence around the outside, covered in ivy, easy enough to climb. The bone yard itself was overgrown and most of the headstones were broken, apart from the big ones - they always stand, even if not always straight. There were rows and rows of them, packed as tight as could be and although there weren't no trees overhead it felt cramped and made me stomach squirm. All those people, a whole village full, all had different lives; different pasts, and all were now lying, rotting in the ground. I found the plot easy enough and was glad to see that the weeds hadn't grown over it. There was no stone on this one, no name, just the plot number. I got to work.

Class don't just count in life, the rich folks get put in mausoleums, marble bedrooms, poor folks get a dirt blanket and a thin blanket it is. Some folks who have managed to scrape together some coins get put further down, like this one. Deep it was and as I'm slopping the mud out the rain starts to fall again. At first I was glad 'cause I'd worked up plenty of heat, after a couple of minutes puddles start forming and the work gets harder. I'll tell you something; when you're alone in a bone yard you're all alone. I dug and dug and with every spade out I thanked me dead mother that I was closer to finishing. When me shovel hits pine I stop to take a breather. Steam time; a thin mist comes out of a fresh dug grave on a cold night. The odd thing is that usually lots of bugs and crawlies start scurrying away from the hole but there was nothing. Not a movement, not a sound. I was starting to think that I wanted this job over.

Inside the old pine crate the body is usually gift-wrapped in a Hessian sack and this one was no exception. You never take the shroud, you see, like I said, the police don't care much about the body but they do if you nick the wrapping. Property of the crown and that's a trip to the triple tree, meaning a hanging. The trouble was the rain and the age of thing made it rip open as I tried to lift

it out. I'll never forget that thing inside.

To say it was human aint wholly the truth. Parts of it, what I could see, was human, parts weren't. I kinda remember once I saw this fella was buried with his pet snake and when I dug him up the snake was half rotten and sort of melted into him, well there was something about this thing that sort of reminded me of that, sick. There was something else, something I'd rather not say, something perverse. It was rotten, must've been down there for a while, not quite falling apart but slimy. Grey it was but it must've been normal human colour once. I don't like to recall the details. I don't mind telling you, its was hideous and the only word that come to mind was monster.

I thought about dropping me spade and running. It would have been the sensible thing to do and it took some nerve even to think otherwise. I knew if I'd have run then me job would've been over, nobody hires a coward to dig up bodies, and without this job the workhouse was all that waited. Time was pressing on and I figured the rain weren't getting no lighter, so I swallowed me bile and tried to get on with it. It weren't no easy job getting that thing out of the ground. It didn't weigh no more than a human body but what with the rain and all…

I remember heaving and puffing 'till I didn't think I could take no more. I knew if I stopped I'd never get the job done but me back was breaking so I stood there over the thing and lit a fag. The rain had soaked me through and me hair was stuck to my forehead. I remember lookin' round and thinking, this is why people are afraid of bone yards. You couldn't see clean across it and the moon had lit only one part of it but the part it had lit was lit bright. The ground was all mud and the puddles had started to run into each other to form little rivers. The stones were grim, real eerie like.

I put a new sack on it and started off to the address I was given. By then it weren't thundering but the moon and clouds kinda made it look like lightning. Anyhow when I turned up at this gaff the cold started setting in.

I put the thing on a cart and wheeled it around the back of the house. Some little creep took the thing, right stunted little slime he

was, looked like a cross between girl and a monkey. He fidgeted around in his pocket and pulled out a bag of coins and with a nasty smirk he shoved the money in me hand and slammed the door. No thanks which was unusual, normally too many thanks, but paid was good. The pay was good.

Down at the Red Lion there was this woman I liked, big lass but nice. Me luck was in and after a few stiff drinks me evening ended in a good way. I didn't hear anything of Doctor Thomsk 'till a week after that.

***

I woke up early that morning still at the Inn, it was so as I woke up with Bessy the big lass. There was a knocking at the door and when I opened it there was some skinny geezer there. At first I thought that it was Bessy's bloke collecting but then I realised he wasn't wearing a shirt so I paid him attention. He put on a posh voice and said there was someone to see me. I had me clothes on and was down the stairs quick as I figured it was a copper, it wasn't, it was him, Doctor Thomsk.

I remember that week seeming sweet 'till that moment, he looked at me with strong distaste and I recon I looked at him the same way.

'Another job Mr Denny.' He said in a right 'lardy dar' way. 'A tad different but I trust your disposition will produce no objections.'

I felt annoyed, he was insulting me and I didn't know how to respond. The bad taste of his job and the bad taste of his ways left me ready to boot his hind. You understand I got me pride, but pride never kept the bailiffs at bay.

The job seemed easy enough and I'd already dirtied me hands with his work. I didn't figure it could get any worse. I was wrong.

***

Heavy this jar was. I think I guessed it was a jar before I

looked, you see it was covered up but not enough to hide what it was. Like I said before, I'd had lots of business with doctors before so I knew that there was a body part inside, usually an organ, usually in yellow liquid, not always. I took it from where I dropped that last package off and had to drop it off at some posh house on the West side of town. The journey had been difficult, for some reason he wanted me to do it during the day, I ain't much of a day person. There were a lot of people about, all bustling around in their innocent little ways. When I got to the gaff I was happy and as I stood outside this door I looked at them going about their normal ways, wives, mothers, young and old, men who was gentlemen, men who hadn't had such an easy ticket in life. I looked and for the first time I thought, you lucky buggers, even the poor ones. I thought, you ain't the same as me, even with no money you got a sense of decency. I was just getting to think about heavy thoughts when the door opened and there was this woman standing there.

Now I like women, posh women especially, but this lass was wrong. I can't put me finger on it, could be 'cause she was so tall, seven foot if I'm an inch. It could've been what she was wearing, not really weird but not quite right, like it was all different peoples clothes, she looked like a patchwork quilt. The eyes, her eyes, looked right through you like you weren't there but like she was doing it on purpose and she had thick eyebrows like a bloke. In a funny way she could have been pretty but she weren't.

'Denny?' she says in a funny accent that was more country slur than foreign,' Come in.'

I follows her in through the hall and into another room and then she just stands there looking at me as if she was reading my mind. I hope she weren't. After a while she says, 'Wait there I'll fetch the master to collect your delivery.'

'The master?', the pigging 'master?' It ain't right when someone says that and lets face it no one says that.

So, quilt woman goes in and I'm left by myself with nothing to do but just look around. Posh room, real nice but kinda bare looking, no ornaments or other things you'd usually find in a home. Nothing that said I live here and here are the things that I love.

There was only one painting and it hung over a grand old fireplace, it was Thomsk captured in all his sinister glory. The rest of the room was all marble 'n' brass, fancy but not comfortable.

A few minutes pass and me shoes is starting to pinch and then the idea to have a look at this package enters me head. I wait for a while and hope that 'the master' or quilt woman will come back and it'll be over. A few more minutes, I got some dignity and understand I ain't one for interfering but given the circumstances… Just a few minutes more. My shoes are really pinching and me feet hurt. Although I never noticed it, there must have been a clock in the hall, one of those big wooden standing ones. The things tick-tocking and I'm listening, listening and waiting, fighting the urge to look under that cloth cover. Tick-tock, tick-tock, I start humming some tune and all the time I'm trying to think of something else, anything else. I can't tell you why I wanted to look so much, maybe it was because of what I dug up for Thomsk before. Tick-tock, tick-tock; I stood there like kid with someone else's apple and I wanted a bite. My shoes really pinched and the part of me that said its wrong to look joined up with the bit that said you don't want to look. Tick-tock.

I uncovered it and covered it up again pretty quick, it was that things head. When I'd dug that thing up in the night and dank I had been in a hurry to get the job done with. It'd spilled out of its slimy sack and I'd put it back in. I'd seen the head when it was still attached to that damned body but not the face, not the face. By the cringe it was a nasty shock. There was no doubt it was the same head, there can't be many things on this Earth with skin like that. It had little knobs that stuck out on its head, horns, that's all they could have been. I thought that was the worst and what with the rot and the scales it was plenty bad for most, but that face! That evil face!

I was just starting to ask myself a million questions when the door opens. I said I'd covered it up quick but not quick enough, this bloke came through the oak door quicker. It was the little slimy geezer from the original drop off, he looks at me and at first he's angry. He glares and then remembers that he's little and soft; years

of diggin' don't leave you soft and although I like me drink an' all, working and weather ain't left me looking like a little girl. I smiled kind of brash like as if to say what are you going to do and then out from behind him steps this hulking beast of a man. One look at him and I know they're holding the winning hand.

My mother didn't raise no fool and in just one moment I realised that I was bang in trouble. You see 'till then I figured that they was happy to pay and I was happy to stay schtum, it seemed like a fair deal. They paid once but it looked like that was me last supper and one look at the human castle and I suddenly felt like the runt must have done when I smiled at him. The heavy was there to cut off a leak and I was running, right out the bloody door, unfortunately he followed.

I ran and the people in the street moved, when they didn't move they fell, gentlemen an' all. All the time he was an inch out of reach, sometimes less. I was at top speed, not in rhythm, just frantic, arms flying teeth clenched and desperate. I was looking for some hole, some cover, somewhere to make an advantage. I've had trouble outrunning coppers and this was no easy escape. My chest was bursting, legs pumping and every sinew stretching as I pounded down the streets. This was it, I told myself, this is your time. Jolting with angry energy, I was always an inch out of reach. The muck on the floor was splashing out and with every step I tried to beat the wave of it, I never managed. Me throat was dry and phlegm was heaving in my windpipe. The heavy was only a couple of steps away and that meant that I was only couple of steps away from a sudden end. I tried to stride further and longer but to be honest my mind had little effect on me limbs; they were doing their best anyway. I thought I'd had it, thought I'd lost the race and there weren't gonna be no second prize. All the time, I'm looking for me moment, looking for someway to duck out. Suddenly the break presented itself. A barrow stall set up on the corner of a narrow street. I tore through and with one movement pulled the barrow behind me and apples went everywhere. It worked and soon enough I'd lost him but I kept running. I knew deep inside that the chase hadn't ended there. They weren't going to give up in just one day.

***

At first I lay low in the house of a little old lady that I knew. Don't get the idea that she's a sweet old dear, I met her in the city jail and she had killed her old man. She owed me; she owed a lot of people and that was why she wasn't rotting in a gibbet. The food was bloody awful and the place was dirty as hell but she was an alright lass.

A day goes past and I start to thinking. You see I'd had this idea for some time, I know a lot of people and one bloke had offered to set me up in the country. I always loved the city but I had kept reminding him of his offer just in case I ever needed it; the sweet shop only has so many sweets and I knew the shopkeeper would catch me thieving at some point. The police turn a blind eye, the whores and the landlords don't care but the public does, nobody wants to reach the afterlife and find that some doctor has stolen their liver. I saw my old man cut to ribbons by a cotton weaver and then I had to work under one, life and death don't hold no majesty for me but most think otherwise, they want to get to heaven and they want to get there whole. You see, I live in a different world to most, I spend my nights buying and selling teeth I've yanked from corpses. I sit by candle light and plot diggings, plot money for me to live and livings good. I always knew it couldn't last for ever so I tried to keep me doors open as it were.

I get in touch with this little creep who runs errands and send out some messages. He comes back with some money I had him collect and some different clothes, not much; I ain't much of a clothes sort of a bloke. He also brings bad news, he's got a broadsheet with him and he points out the bit he knows I'll want to hear: Two women killed, torn apart. By what I read and what the creep has heard by way of grapevine it all sounded very nasty, bits of them eaten, bits missing. The police were looking for a madman with incredible strength. The women? One was quilt woman, the other was Bessy. I don't know what made me sicker the fact that big Bessy was dead or that it must have been the same bloke done

it who was after me. That meant that it was my fault.

I figure I had me cards marked anyway and the heavy, who I had began to name Killer, was there to do a job. I knew I had it coming and somebody had probably pointed Killer in Bessy's direction but why quilt woman? Because she knew me face? Truth is I was trying to think about anything except what was in me head, truth is I was trying not to think about Bessy. In all me attempts to plot different ways of settling down with a bit a gold to line me crib, I'd always tried to picture a bride and the only woman's face I could ever picture was hers. She was alright was Bessy, she listened when I talked, understood and she didn't have that look in her eye, that look of disgust.

I took a bottle and went back to bed. All I could see in me head was Bessy's face, quilt woman's face and the face of the huge madman who was after me. Deep down inside I kept returning to that head in the jar and to its hellish face.

***

I woke early that morning to shouting and screaming, then silence. I stood up and waited, it must have been twenty minutes and not a stir, not a sound. I can't tell you how my heart beat. I just stood like an idiot and waited for something else to happen. I made it as far as my own door and then stopped. I wanted to go down, to run and help but another part, the part that had been beaten by the police told me to have it out the window. Maybe it wasn't a scream or maybe the old cow had spilled stew on herself. I stood like a loon trying to work out why the sky is blue and finally I went down the stairs. Slowly, step by step and still no noise. I reached the door and carefully pushed it open. What a mess. It was the old lady or what was left of the poor old sow, it looked like an explosion in the butcher's shop, her twisted open carcass still had strips of bloody rags on it. Most of her was by the door, real grim. I walked over and looked. There was something there, on the floor. My heart was beating furiously as I leaned down and picked a small purple piece of gut out of the way. It was a footprint, on the floor, a single gore

red footprint. It was big and I knew for sure that Killer had been there. Doctor Thomsk had sent Killer after me to shut me up and he had decided that anybody I might have talked to had to stay quiet as well. Killer had obviously been disturbed otherwise I wouldn't be writing this now.

All the signs pointed in my direction and that meant that the police would be looking for me and unless I made quick movements I was either going to be ripped apart or I was going to the gallows. As sure as soldiers die, Thomsk was gonna make sure I was a suspect even if I hadn't been. Nice; so I figure that it's time to take in some country air. I grabbed me stuff and I was off.

***

I was half way there and as fast as I'm travelling the night is coming closer. I was feeling tired and I hadn't had time to think, luckily, or unluckily. I knew there was a bone yard nearby, that meant shelter and somewhere quiet to sleep. So I goes in and just as I thought, there's a crypt with a door that I can force. It's a big old marble affair but it looks like stone with dark thick vines climbing over every inch of its dirty front. I got in and tried to settle down, making a small fire and lying on the stone bed that housed owner's remains. After a while of laying there I aint getting no warmer and being such a big place the fire weren't doing no good; so I scratch me head and start looking for more stuff to burn. I managed to pull down some of the vines off the front of the crypt and lots of branches off the trees and by the time I'd finished the flames weren't far off the ceiling. It was roaring and I had to leave the door open a little to clear the smoke. Being as it was such a hard journey I went into a light sleep very quickly. I don't normally sleep well but what with the travelling and all, it came quicker than realised. I'd spent a few nights sleeping cold so maybe it was the heat of the fire in that hollow sanctuary that brought peace. I don't know how long I'd been out but I sure as hell remember waking up.

My heart was beating hard and me throat had gone dry as a

coal man's shovel. Someone else was in there with me, in the shadows just out of view. I sat up with a jolt and he stepped out, it was him.

When I look back it all went to pot when I looked at that head in the jar, Bessy, quilt woman and the old lady all had it coming as soon as I looked. Bobbing gently in that thick slime was the face, twisted and ugly, covered in scales but recognisable. I had been the clown all along, a tool to be used and thrown away and still I didn't understand. The face, it was Thomsk, my God that cursed scum face was Doctor Thomsk.

Now he was there large as life, dressed in black, no scales, no horns and very much alive. He looked as sinister as Old Nick himself.

'Questions,' he said 'I know that you saw the head, I know that you saw my beautiful friend '

'Beautiful?' I says, 'It was the ugliest thing I ever saw, and I've seen ugly.'

He ignored my comment.

'I'm sure you understand my position Mr Denny.' He looked nasty and I blurted out something about not talking and money being enough. For a moment I figured he believed me, my heart slowed down and I sort of smiled, then that other thing walked in.

'You've met my brother, Mr Denny.'

Then I saw it, it was that thing I dug up but it was alive, head and all. With its 'Doctor Thomsk' face. It looked bad enough dead but standing there with oozing, pulsating gills, muscles flexed, and they were big muscles, it looked like hell itself. It was eight foot of slavering evil and I ain't sure, even now how intelligent it was. It stood with a kind of slouch but it had a spark in its eyes, a wicked spark of reason, its mouth drooled and it was ill formed like a still birth animal. It was the thing that lurks in the shadows of nightmares, like the horrors that wait on the creaking step. Then I saw, in its brown rotten claws, what looked like the remains of Killer. It dragged him behind it and then dropped him on the floor with a dead thump. I stood paralysed by fear and it stood staring at me. I thought I saw a grin from those twisted lips, it was getting closer

and closer and I had nowhere to go. I took a step back and then hit the wall but still it came. It moved closer and closer until I could feel its breath on my face, smell the rotten meat.

'I won't lie to you, Mr Denny - this won't be pleasant, not for you.'

Then to my utter horror and disgust the thing spoke, 'It wasn't easy for Bessy either.' It slurred.

At first I felt utter revulsion and nothing else; this thing, this venomous godless beast was not just a beast and then I was overcome with anger, like I've never felt before. The words it had said sunk in, 'Bessy'.

Like I said, I ain't no soft boy and I flew at this thing, fists, teeth and rage. As I was attacking I was aware that it was hurting me but I didn't care. What else did I have to lose? Fists pounding, tears in eyes not a care, just violence. The anger of my whole life came out in that moment. I ain't making boast but at that moment I didn't think there was a man on this earth could have stood. Harder and harder I hit and bit and head butted, not weak or tired but harder and harder. For every blow I made, it made two and its twisted claws were beginning to reach me, were beginning to make me aware. I carried on; there was nothing but blackness around the edges and that thing in the centre. Pound and bite and kick, it was all that I was, all that was inside and the monster was beginning to reach inside. Then, suddenly it stopped and I didn't. It kind of moved backwards and just as my last punch caught, I saw him rising up from his bloody heap; it was Killer and he was still alive.

He picked it up raising the writhing body over his head with his huge muscular arms. The thing was trying to fight and even as Killer was carrying the thing, the thing was dishing out blows that would surely finish off his already broken body. With a final yell and a final effort Killer carried the thing into the fire and they both went up in flames. Fire shot everywhere in liquid bursts over the walls and the two stayed in the centre of what had become a rabid inferno, wrapped in a blazing, deadly grip. They fought, one dying and one evil and all I did was stand and watch, Doctor Thomsk did not. Without a sound Thomsk rushed into the fire, I can only think

that at the end of the day that thing was his brother and even amongst the scum of hell, that must count for something. Just as Thomsk reached them the great beast lashed out and it caught him full in his upper torso. Thomsk was thrown clean across the crypt, almost torn in two. The look of contorted horror was cut into his face as his head slumped into the bloody flesh that had once been his chest and then he breathed no more. In the fire the beast went mad screaming and tearing chunks out of Killer's back and thighs. For the first time in what seemed like an hour of fighting I rushed forward but there was a blast of flames and I was forced back. Killer was no longer a killer, he was hero.

The big man looked at me and without saying a word I knew that he wanted me to live. He knew that he was going to die; he knew that they both were and he wanted me to live.

I turned my back and ran.

***

Now the police are after me, if they find me, I'll hang. I wrote this hoping that somebody would find this and help me. I wrote this so that people will know that that thug gave his life for me, the life of a grave robber.

I wrote this so as people will know that for most of my worthless life I weren't no better than what I was to be hanged for but in those moments when me and Bessy were together, in those quiet soft moments wrapped in blankets as the sun rose over the Red Lion, I weren't no grave robber and Bessy weren't no whore.

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TSCHAICHOWSKY'S LONELY SYMPATHY

by Nadia Mook

He wakes up in the night,
to feel the raindrops on his brow.
All alone in this life.
So he goes down to the waters edge
to appeal to the courts ahead of time.
But the Judge has passed the sentence,
with the lies.

And he plays his guitar at dawn
In front of the rising sun
while his secret sins
lie deep in long winter night.

He walks down to the devil's knees
with hand and shovel cocked.
he takes away the youth
from the girl that he robbed.
He took his pain
his arms did ache
just like his lonely heart.
When he lifted her
out of the concrete slab.

She broke the stillness
with her arms swaying silently in the night breeze.
Such a young beauty
to realise that life had passed on.
He sight astonished him.
So he carried her home.

In his eyes she was life exuberant
but in his senses she was dead
with those strange marks upon the neck.
So his nightly love was cold to touch
just like his ebbing heart.
He gave her one last blow
like the other one last night, she lay in his head
blond hair wrapped round her skull,
a Barbie doll.

Her limbs moved full of unliking as a
plastic doll.
She couldn't scream
when he came round.
Her only sounds silences by death.
He took her back.

He plays his guitar at dawn
but restrings at dusk.
This is the only way
he reminds himself
about trust.

OUT BEYOND THE CLEARING

by Matthew Entwistle

Out beyond the clearing
Amongst the woods and trees
Dwells a ghastly shadow
That is my disease

Never have I seen him
I do not know his name
But his presence chills me
I fear him just the same

Often have I sensed him
Often heard the sounds
Measured, heavy breathing
When nothing is around

Often have I felt his stare
His eyes upon my back
Often have I shivered
Seeing nothing on the track

None save grasp of shadow
But I know he's there
A presence such that fills me
With darkness and despair

There is no escaping
I live, withdrawn and wan
Waiting 'til the day he strikes
All hope for me is gone

TEY
by Matthew Entwistle

Only the insane walk the path,
Treading the boards to an epitaph.
Madness and malaise mark the route,
That bids all fools, come, follow suit,
A spider's web of abject greed,
Fashioned from books of darkest creed.
Malignant stand foundation stones,
Of buildings ground from human bones;
A city of the living dead,
Built from fear, of hate and dread,
Whose endless cries and harrowing moans,
Perpetuate this twisted home,
That even now, expands with night;
A bloated, feeding parasite.

THE NECROMANCER
by Matthew Entwistle

On that dread night, by candlelight,
We watched him raise the dead.
With fearful glare, lay chanting there,
From the grimoire long he read.

Then from the ground, and all around,
The earth gave forth her keep.
With dreadful hate, stood animate,
Awakened from their sleep.

And there they stood, devoid of blood,
An army of the chill,
Of fleshless bone and shuddering moan -
Subordinate to his will.

At his command, the sweep of a hand,
Away to some murderous deed,
A monstrous hell of sickening shell,
Driven on at unnatural speed.

A (HELPFUL) WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

by Matthew Entwistle

When finding box of mystery,
Please keep the seal unbroken,
There's rather nasty history,
If that inside is woken.

We often find a charm or two,
Has little to no effect,
Though most would take a different view,
This thing has no respect!

A rabbit's foot, or dead man's eye,
Won't usually stop the beast,
So find a helpful passer-by,
And give the box a feast!

If you enjoyed this book, you might like…

The British Horror Films website
www.britishhorrorfilms.co.uk

Started in 2000 as a testament to one man's obsession with the 1973 film Horror Hospital, the British Horror Films website has grown into one of the top three horror film websites in the world*.

It features hundreds of lighthearted reviews of genre films shot on or funded from these isles, from the sublime (*Dead Of Night*) to the ridiculous (the aforementioned *Horror Hospital*). Films from esteemed companies such as Hammer and Amicus rub shoulders with forgotten trash from the 70s and 80s, all described in wonderful detail but with the reviewer's tongue firmly in his cheek.

The site also features a burgeoning online community with more than 1,000 members, all fans of British horror, and all very friendly.

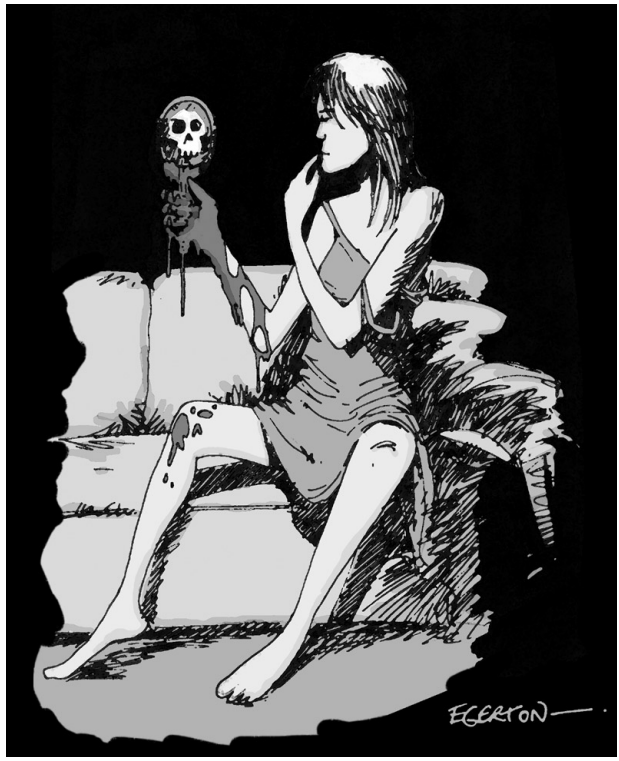
So whether you want to find out about a long forgotten classic or discuss the people who made that long forgotten classic with like-minded fans, why not log on to www.britishhorrorfilms.co.uk?

*according to Google rankings

DEAD WEIGHT

By E. H. Bourne

In 2007, BHF Books will publish its first novel - a comedy horror by new writer E. H. Bourne. For a taster, turn the page...



Prologue

He was happy in the dark.

The enveloping blackness was like a thick velvet veil across his vision. He liked it best that way. Nothing to distract or worry him, no chance of accidental discovery. In the dark he felt protected, he felt nurtured and cared for, despite the biting cold of the empty void. These pockets of total darkness had become harder and harder to find as time had gone on. When he first arrived in the void there had just been the occasional doorway back, the light cascading from them just pinpricks in a vast expanse of black. These days they seemed to be everywhere, in every room and on every street, infecting this world with their brightness and colour. Having them so easily on hand made his job easier, but made finding somewhere to rest much, much harder.

As much as he enjoyed his work – and he did *enjoy his work, that much was obvious – he enjoyed the darkness more. He'd gladly give up the journeys into the bright world beyond the doors if it meant he could stay here, in this tiny pocket of inky nothing, for all eternity. But he couldn't, he knew that. It was part of The Deal. The Deal made so long ago, which had kept him in gainful employment for… how long was it? He no longer knew. It had been decades since time had stopped meaning anything to him, longer since he had spoken to another, or even taken a decision himself.*

Waiting was what he did. Waiting, and killing.

With a grunt he jerked his head up and sniffed the cold, sterile air, then cocked his head to the side. The call had come. He sprang to his feet and sauntered off in the direction he was bid. As he moved through the void, the almost solid darkness seemed to shift around him. Objects began to appear - walls and floors, picked out in greys and dull reds. Strange ghostly figures swam in and out of the shadows. Occasional brilliant flashes of colour blasted from shapes suspended in the air, and then were

gone. Despite the riot of movement, no sound carried on the stale, cold air.

Good, it was night time on the other side. If it had been day, this part of the void would have been a riot of light and colour, much the same as the other world. That hated place of warmth and joy.

He made sure that he kept to the shadowed parts of this strange landscape, occasionally stopping to listen and sniff the air. Then he saw what he was looking for – a doorway, and a big one, this time. An almost perfect square, suspended in mid air, through which poured light and colour which illuminated the void around it, the glare from it revealing a room. Framed pictures hung from the walls, the wallpaper was faded and peeling. Slumped in a battered old leather chair was an elderly woman. She was wearing a floral night-dress and her hair was in curlers. Her eyes were fixed on the television in the corner, the brightness spilling from the square box shattering and fragmenting as it hit the void..

His hand dipped into the pocket of his coat and immediately found his one possession. His gnarled, bony fingers curled round the string-wrapped handle of the knife and a low chuckle came from his mouth as he stepped into the light.

1.

'You see, the problem with horror films today is they just don't have to try very hard.'

Will leant forward in a conspiratorial way, thin shoulders hunched, and tapped the ash off the end of his cigarette as if to reinforce his point. Sandra flashed a knowing look at the other people sitting at the table, and then looked ceilingwards.

'You see, modern movies can just chuck buckets of blood around and have people dying in ever more gory ways,' he continued. 'The kind of films I'm talking about had to use other methods to scare people.'

Sandra sat back on her stool in the resigned way she did every time she heard this particular conversation starting up. Still, she thought, I suppose at least her husband had an interest. He could be the kind of bloke who spent his time either at work or slumped in front of the tele… oh. It was Friday night in the smoky, nicotine-stained pub full of broken chairs and overflowing ash trays which someone with an extremely refined sense of humour had christened The Imperial, and as usual, the talk had turned to 'crap movies I have seen'. In The Imperial, this was one of the main topics of conversation, along with 'crap football teams I have supported' and 'crap records I have bought'. That was the problem with the place, thought Sandra. All people ever did was talk crap.

Around the table was just about the sum total of her and Will's social circle. Karen and Dave - two people, but known by just one word, spoken 'KarenandDave' - and Will's friend from work, Lewis. God, sometimes she got so depressed when she saw how her life had turned out. 28 years old, married, and having to spend every Friday night in the company of dodgy Dave the computer programmer who was being paid far more than he deserved, Karen the nurse, and Lewis the wanker. It was Sandra's turn to drive, and Will had downed three pints of Old Peculiar and automatically become the pub's answer to Barry Norman. Except

with a slightly smaller forehead.

She picked up the packet of Marlboro Lights from the table and tapped one out. A quick nudge in the ribs got Will to produce his lighter from inside his jacket, and as she inhaled the first drag she looked at her beloved, sitting there holding forth on how Peter Cushing's name was a seal of quality, and tried to imagine how others might see him.

He was tall, well over six feet, and thin, with pale skin and an unruly mop of blonde hair. He was still wearing his black leather jacket, despite the baking heat of the pub. He was also wearing his glasses, which had become a necessity as his job as a local newspaper reporter had him staring for hours at a time into a computer screen. In other words, she thought, he looked like a geek. He sounded like one as well.

'For God's sake, Will,' she interjected, 'can't you talk about something else? You sound like a geek.'

Will stopped talking, turned and looked at his wife over the top of his glasses, and then carried on.

'You see, in the 50s and 60s, the British horror movie was considered the very pinnacle of the genre. You had Hammer, and other, lesser-known companies, all churning out these gothic masterpieces. They were low budget shockers, but they had style - and the cinema audiences wanted to see them. Then The Exorcist came along and buggered it all up. After that, people only wanted to see horror films with expensive special effects. Then some bright spark in America thought up the slasher movie, and the whole thing went out of the window. Man gets killed, man gets resurrected, man kills lots of people with a fuck-off chainsaw. Where's the style in that? Friday the Thirteenth, Halloween, Nightmare on fucking Elm Street, they're all the same bollocks. They're all the same fucking story. No class, no style. Anyway, Theatre of Blood. *There's* a film. Or The Ghoul, the 70s version with Peter Cushing.'

'Or Friday the Thirteenth.' It was Lewis's turn to enter the conversation. And as usual, he was baiting Will, only Will was already too pissed to notice.

'No! No, no, no, no, no, no!' Sandra glared at Will with a look that was half pity, half barely-disguised contempt . She hated it when his voice reached that pitch. Any more agitated and he'd be on a level only dogs and bats could hear. 'Have you not been listening to what I've been saying? Friday the Thirteenth is the total anti… antithy… opposite of what I'm talking about.'

'But you have to admit, it was a seminal work. Low budget stalk-and-slash. It started a whole new generation of films.'

Lewis, broader and more thick set than Will, with short, receding brown hair and a dreadful taste in after work shirts, looked earnestly at Will and then burst out laughing. 'Although, to be honest, I don't really

care. Do you want another pint?'

'Yes.'

'What about you, m'dear?' said Lewis to Sandra, standing up and reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket for his wallet.

'Go on, then, I'll have another Diet Coke, I suppose.'

'Thought so. Will always said you were a cheap date.'

Sandra turned and looked daggers at her husband, who shrugged in reply. As Lewis turned round to ask KarenandDave if they wanted a second half of shandy each, Sandra put out her cigarette and reached for another. Just at the moment, lung cancer, emphysema and an early death couldn't come quickly enough.

Lewis was making his way through the pub towards the bar. Up until last year the place had lain untouched by the brewery since at least the mid eighties, with nicotine stained walls, battered skirting boards, soggy carpets and an ancient jukebox, which only played Queen and Bon Jovi. On a Saturday night there had been few punters to trouble the bored staff. Then the brewery had decided to do up the place, and spent three months gutting the entire building. They had moved the bar, knocked through walls, re-plastered and painted, stripped wood and removed carpets. Then when they had finished, they smeared the walls with nicotine coloured paint, distressed the wood and fitted a new jukebox which played nothing but Bon Jovi and Queen. And added a few tasteful framed prints on the walls. The locals had been distressed when they first heard of the plans. When they saw the finished result distress turned to amazement that anyone could have been bothered to take a pub and spend a fortune on it to make it look worse than it did when they started. Then their amazement turned to anger when they realised the beer still tasted bloody awful. But they kept coming in, even when the 'new' Imperial started attracting more people, who wouldn't have even thought of entering the place before, but now thought it had a kind of olde worlde charm.

Sandra drew heavily on her cigarette and watched Lewis make his way through the too-young girls in ridiculously short skirts and cropped tops, their boyfriends with gelled-flat hair, untucked shirts and baggy jeans, the elderly women in even shorter skirts than the young girls, the middle aged men with Brylcreemed hair and leather blousons, and of course the wacky, 'I got to the Imp in an *ironic* kind of way' students which made up the Imperial's clientele.

Lewis could charitably be called 'wide', and was getting wider all the time. He had reached that point in life where God decided whether you were going to be a scrawny git or a fat bastard, and it looked like Will and Lewis, both the same age at 29, were about to diverge. Will would always be skinny, despite eating like a horse, and Lewis would keep expanding, despite being on a permanent diet. Puppy fat had turned into muscle at

about 18, and now it was turning back into fat.

Career wise, they were very different too. Despite enjoying the same extra-curricular activities basically just watching crappy old movies, once they were behind the desks in the small district newspaper office they shared they became completely at odds with each other. Will was a good writer, but lazy to the point of coma. Meanwhile Lewis was more of a career hack. He had started in journalism aged 16, straight from school, and it was all he had ever wanted to do. Will fell into the same job aged 23 after failing an English degree and drifting through several dead-end jobs. Lewis had to try, but had a lot of determination to get the job right. Will had never tried, and really couldn't give a toss. Neither had any real ambition to do anything else. This could be the recipe for disaster in a small office, but somehow it seemed to work. The editor seemed to like, or at least tolerate, both of them, and the paper got out each week.

Over at the bar there were raised voices and the sound of glasses smashing. Whatever was happening, Sandra couldn't see through the crowds. She wondered disinterestedly whether Lewis was involved, although she doubted it. For all his size and pushiness, he was as big a coward as Will.

Then she saw him making his way back though the throng with the drinks on a tray, shaking his head. He carefully placed the drinks on the table.

'Fucking students,' he murmured under his breath.

'What's going on?' asked Sandra.

'Ah, one of them was acting up, and he got a slap from Big Terry. I don't think she meant to hurt him, but she's probably broken his nose.'

The group nodded, as one. Everyone knew not to mess with Big Terry, a woman in her mid 50s who sat in her own seat at the end of the bar.

'God, I hate this pub.' Sandra suddenly announced. 'I mean, look at us. We're all young professionals yet we come here every bloody week-end to a pub full of jailbait, idiots and students, and listen to 'Living on a Prayer' and 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. What went wrong? We should be at some club in Manchester, not in this fucking hole.'

'Oooh, who rattled your cage?' said Lewis. 'What's the matter? Is it rag week or something?'

'Shut up, Lewis, you wanker. Will - tell him to shut up.'

'Shut up, Lewis, you wanker.'

Lewis and Will dissolved into fits of giggles. Sandra shrugged, and turned to talk to KarenandDave.

2.

Harold finished dunking the teabag in its second cup and poured in the milk. Friday nights aren't what they used to be, he thought as he picked up the tray and made his way back into the lounge. The days when he and his wife would spend their Fridays out on the town, either at the old Apollo cinema or at the Alhambra dance hall, were long gone. In those days his pay as an apprentice on the railways would stretch to a good evening out. These days his and Margaret's pensions barely stretched to feeding them for a week, let alone allowing them to go out.

As he made his way slowly through the hallway of their tiny terraced home, pictures of long-dead parents and long grown-up children on the walls, he heard the sound of raucous laughter and shouting coming from outside in the street. Bloody kids coming out of the Imperial, probably off to some club. It was all sex, drugs and booze these days. Bloody hell, he wished he was fifty years younger, he could do with a bit of that. Still, at least he kept himself busy. He and his friend Frank had their own little hobby, oh yes. Those bastards at the council thought they could shit on the little people as much as they liked, and no-one would lift a finger to stop them. Spend taxpayers' money in the strip bars and brothels of the town's German 'twin town' would they? Well, Frank and Harold would show them a thing or two. They may be pushing 80, the pair of them, but they still had all their faculties, all right. Once they'd finished their dossier on the antics of that bloody lot and given it to the papers, the entire council would come crashing down, oh yes. They'd see. He knew their replacements probably wouldn't be any better, but at least these two old men would have struck a blow for the little people. Only today, whilst working alone in the library, Harold had come across something that would blow their socks off at The Clarion. He had telephoned Frank earlier on, hardly able to contain his excitement, but as both men didn't trust telephones in this day and age of satellites and bugging, they had decid-

ed not to talk until tomorrow. Frank had come up with his own little bombshells in the past, but this one was all Harold's. To tell the truth, it scared him a little, but the excitement he felt cancelled that out. Harold could hardly wait until the morning.

He arrived at the door to the lounge, which must have closed behind him when he went to make the tea. He couldn't open it without putting the tray down on the floor, and that would involve a fair amount of pain for his arthritis-raddled limbs. 'Margaret? Margaret, can you hear me? The door's shut behind me, and I can't open it holding this tray.'

No answer. The bloody woman must have fallen asleep again.

'MARGARET! For f…'

He stopped himself. Margaret didn't like him cursing, even in the privacy of their own home. She was always asleep these days. Through the heavy wooden door he could hear the television blasting away. It was on far louder than it should be, because they were both getting a bit hard of hearing. Still, she could sleep through anything.

'Right.' Harold balanced the tray between the crook of his arm and his chest, and reached for the door, but as he did so, the tray over balanced and the two cups crashed to the floor, soaking his trouser legs with the scalding liquid.

'Oh SHIT!' All thought of whether Margaret liked him swearing or not were forgotten. 'For fuck's sake, you stupid fucking woman - I was only gone for five minutes -how could you fall asleep that quickly?'

As he ranted he flung open the door and strode into the room, his anger making him forget his arthritis and his scalded legs.

As he came into the room the door banged against the table next to the doorway and swung shut again behind him, and as usual he got a shock when he saw himself in the large ornate mirror that hung directly opposite above the fireplace. Margaret loved that mirror, but he hated it. *Every single bloody time* he walked into the room it gave him a fright. Margaret was in her chair with her back to him, where he had left her five minutes ago. The electric fire was the only light in the room, other than the television, which was flickering away in the corner and still making a dreadful din.

'MARGARET! How you can sleep though that bloody noise I'll never know.' He grabbed the remote control off the table next to her chair and muted the sound, then walked round and stood between her and the screen. Margaret's face was lit by the orange glow from the one-bar fire, but she wasn't asleep. Her eyes were wide open, and her thin face was contorted in a terrible grimace of fear. Her false teeth had fallen from her wide open mouth onto her breast, and a wet patch was forming on her pink dressing gown from the drool which had followed them. She was trying to speak, but no words were coming out.

'Oh, Margaret, whatever's happened?' All anger gone, Harold went to help his wife of 55 years, and as he bent towards her realised she had wet herself. 'Whatever's…'

Margaret suddenly let out a piercing shriek, and Harold jumped back away from her.

'Margaret? Margaret - it's me, it's Harold. Don't be frightened.'

Harold felt tears stinging his eyes. In the last few years the pair of them had been made painfully aware of their own mortality as their faculties had begun to fade, but he had always hoped and prayed that the end would come peacefully and with some kind of dignity. It looked like in Margaret's case, that wasn't to be.

But Margaret wasn't looking at him, she was looking past him. Was there someone behind him?

Despite himself, Harold turned, and came face to face with a man. He jumped, then realised he was looking at his reflection. Again. Margaret was looking into the mirror. 'What is it? What's the matter?'

Margaret was gibbering now, her toothless mouth opening and closing but forming no words, her whole body shaking. Harold looked from his reflection to his wife, then back to the mirror. It was a huge, square affair with a thin, gilded frame, which stretched all the way down from the ceiling of the room to just above the fireplace. Margaret's mother had given it to them as a 'moving in present' in 1947, and despite Harold's protests that it was too big and looked out of place in the small room, it had stayed for over 50 years in the same spot. What the hell was the matter with the woman? It seemed a bit late to suddenly decide she hated the thing.

As he looked into the reflection of the room, his eye caught a slight movement. The door was swinging back open, slowly, filling the room with the yellow light of the 40 watt bulb in the hallway. He turned back to his wife. 'I'm going to call for an ambulance.'

The phone was on the table by the doorway, but as he looked up he realised something was wrong. The door was still shut. He walked over to it and tried it - it had closed behind him as he came into the room, in the same way it had done when he left before. His eyes must be playing tricks on him. He looked back at the mirror and felt the hairs rising on the back of his neck. *In the reflection, the door was still swinging open!*

He walked over to the mantelpiece, and looked at the reflection, then back to the still firmly shut door, then back at the mirror. The door in the reflection had swung fully open now, and was resting against the small table. He could see the wallpaper on the far wall of the hallway. Yet the *real* door in the *real* room was still firmly shut. He peered into the mirror, wishing his eyes were as good as they used to be. He must be going mad. It wasn't just Margaret, the *pair* of them had gone insane. Then, as

he looked, he saw more movement. *Something* was casting a shadow on the wall of the hall. *Something* was walking towards the doorway from the direction of the kitchen. He stood transfixed, looking past his own reflection, through the doorway into the hall, where a figure was coming into view around the doorframe…

In the house next door, Gary Doran was taking advantage of his wife's girls' night out to watch a few of his favourite DVDs - Kleenex on the table by his chair and trousers round his ankles, ready in case she made a surprise return home. But as the Clockwork Orgy started to get into full swing, there was a sudden scream from next door, putting him off his stroke. Gary hitched up his trousers and walked over to the joining wall. He was getting fed up of this.

He started banging on the wall. 'Oi! Victor fucking Meldrew! Turn down that fucking telly or I'll come round there and stick my fucking boot through it, so help me!'

There was a crash, and another scream, which cut off as if a plug had been pulled.

'That's better.' Gary dropped his trousers and sat back down.

3.

The blue Ford Focus pulled up in the street outside the terraced house, and Lewis pulled his ample frame out of the back door. He fumbled in his jacket for his house keys, and then turned back to the vehicle.

'Now, are you sure you won't come in for a cup of tea?'

Sandra looked back at him through the open driver's window.

'How many times? I'm tired, I want to go to bed, and you make the worst tea in the world. Go to bed, Lew.'

Undeterred, Lewis poked his head through the window to address Will, who was in the passenger's seat. 'How about you? You want a little drinky-poo, don't you, William? The night has only jusht begun.'

Will regarded him with half open eyes, his head wobbling from side to side. 'No, San's right. You do make the worst tea in the world. Besides, I need a lift home.'

'Fair enough.' Lewis withdrew his head from the car, made a theatrical turn around, and staggered towards his front door.

'Do you think we should stay and see he makes it in all right?' said Will.

'No.' Sandra stamped on the accelerator and the car sped off up the street.

Five minutes later, the Focus pulled up outside a small, modern semi in a housing estate on the other side of the town. Sandra got out, slamming the door behind her and stomped over to the front door of the house. She was already through the door before Will had extricated himself from his seat belt. He made sure both his and her doors were locked and then followed her in. 'What's the matter with you?'

Sandra was sitting on a chair in the lounge, stroking their cat, Van Helsing. 'Oh, nothing. It's just that every Friday night it's the same. We go to the Imperial, you get drunk, or if it's your turn to drive, you moan about not being able to drink. And why are all your friends such tossers?

You're quite a nice bloke. You must be, or I wouldn't have married you. Yet you hang around with such a bunch of twats.'

'Lew's not a twat.'

'Oh, he is so a twat. And so is Gordon, and Mark, and as for KarenandDave…'

'Ah! They're YOUR friends!'

The phone started ringing in the kitchen.

'Who on earth is ringing at this time?'

'I'd better get it. It might be work.'

'In all the time you've been at that newspaper, the phone has never rung after 7pm.'

'There's always a first time. Perhaps there's been a murder.'

'There'll be one later on if that's Lewis arsing around.'

Will made his way into the kitchen, switching on the kettle before picking up the phone.

'Hello. Oh, it's you. Yes. Yes, I know. Yes, she is. Yes, you are. 'Bye.'

Will came back into the room.

'That was him, wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Has there been a murder?'

'No. He just wanted to remind me that I'm doing the council meeting on Monday.'

'Right.' Sandra pushed the cat off her lap and walked to the door to the hallway. 'Are you coming to bed?'

'Er, no. They're showing *Dr Phibes Rises Again* in half an hour on BBC2.'

'Fine. Feed the cat, and don't wake me when you finally come up.'

4.

Will brought the Focus to a screeching halt in front of The Clarion's office, like he did every work morning. Lewis jumped out and made his way in to put the kettle on whilst Will parked the car around the back of the building.

By the time he had found a space amongst all the advertising staff's cars and made his way up the fire escape at the back of the building into the dingy first floor editorial office, Lewis had his cup of tea waiting for him. It was a ritual they had played out nearly every morning for the past two years.

Sharon the copy typist, a dark haired 23-year-old who both reporters grudgingly admitted was way out of their league, looked up and smiled at Will as he made his way in, then went back to typing up the cricket match reports. Will picked up his mug, inspected his post to see if there were any CD shaped objects inside any of the envelopes, then sat down and started reading The Times. Lewis, being the first in as usual, had already grabbed The Sun.

The editorial offices of The Clarion weren't exactly what you would call salubrious. They were basically an oblong shaped room, with a large picture window looking out into the street, in front of which were Lewis's and Will's desks, facing each other. A door behind Will led to a staircase, which descended into the advertising department and was the 'official' way in. At the opposite end of the room, was the door Will had come through. In the far corner was the editor's office, basically a desk screened from the rest of the room by a glass partition. Sharon's desk was in between the reporters and the editor.

Natalie, the editor, arrived about ten minutes after Will, coming through the official door and looking stressed. She was only two years older than Will, but like Lewis had started in the business straight from school, and had much more experience. Plus she was ambitious and

determined to get on, unlike either of her male colleagues. Her small frame and girlish looks often threw a lot of people, who naturally expected the editor of a local weekly paper to be both male and a fat, balding alcoholic with a body odour problem.

'Has anything happened this weekend?'

Both reporters shook their heads. 'Have you been to the fire station yet?'

'Yep, we went on our way in.'

'Are you still cadging lifts, Lewis? You only live 10 minutes walk away.'

'Do you think he got that figure by taking regular exercise?'

Lewis balled up a piece of paper and threw it at Will. It missed.

Natalie chose to ignore this. 'Still, it's three days until deadline and we've got that story about the drains. Plus, you haven't been to the police briefing yet, and we've got full council this afternoon. Who's doing that, by the way?'

Both reporters pointed at each other, then Will held up his hands. 'Alright, it's my turn. But I'm not doing the police briefing as well.'

'That's okay,' said Lewis. 'It's my favourite part of the day.'

***

Lewis took advantage of the short walk to the police station to smoke a cigarette. It was a sunny late Autumn day and the leaves were beginning to turn, but it was still nice and warm. Not quite shirt sleeves weather, but definitely not big coat time. The newspaper offices, like everywhere else these days, were strictly non-smoking. Not like the old days he had heard so much about, when every hack had a permanent fag on and a bottle of whisky in their desk draw as they banged out their stories on ancient typewriters. Although the journalist in him thought it would be nice to revisit those days, the sensible part of him knew it would be a nightmare. He'd be an alcoholic chain smoker in no time, and there was no way he could afford to buy more than 10 cigarettes a day on *his* wages, let alone the odd bottle of Scotch.

The police station was over the road from the council offices, right in the centre of the town, and as he approached the two buildings, taking his time because he was only half way through his Silk Cut, he thought how different they were. Most of the power in the small industrial town was centred around this part of town. Although the industry in the area was going from strength to strength - the town had never seen such good fortune before in its 100 years - most of the shops had now gone. Out-of-town shopping developments had finally succeeded in seeing off competition from the small shopkeeper. The only shops left in the town centre were two men's outfitters, an independent record shop, an off licence, a newsagent and a 'fancy goods' store. What 'fancy goods' were Lewis had

no idea, having never set foot in the shop. But he doubted they were that fancy, or for that matter, particularly good.

As well as the police station and the Municipal Buildings, this road also housed the Job Centre, the Thursday Market and the County Courts. Because of this it was usually full of the permanently jobless, criminals, tramps and students. Lewis had often wondered if this was part of a plan by the police so they wouldn't have to stray very far from their nice warm offices to do their jobs. Just a quick jog up the High Street would net even the most bored and unambitious PC at least one burglar, a couple of piss heads, a loitering with intent and someone committing ABH on a student. He had to admit, it was a good way to keep the arrest figures up.

He was walking past the council offices now. They were housed in a huge Victorian Gothic monstrosity of a building, all red brick, spires and gargoyles. The leaded windows were too high to look through, even on the ground floor, and a couple of stone steps led from the pavement up to a pair of sturdy looking dark wooden doors with large brass fittings. Up the centre of the steps was a wheelchair ramp, although what the wheelchair users were supposed to do when they reached the heavy, outward swinging doors was anybody's guess. It was hardly the most welcoming of buildings for a council office to be housed in in modern caring, sharing, positive-thinking Britain, Lewis mused.

The council had tried to change their image just over a year ago. Hundreds of thousands had been spent, the scaffolding had gone up all over the building, and a professional sandblasting team had been sent in under cover of plastic sheeting. Months later the plastic and scaffolding had been removed to reveal a slightly cleaner darkly forbidding Victorian Gothic monstrosity. The fuzzy jowelled architect would no doubt have been proud that his masterpiece would withstand not only the ravages of time, but also the ravages of the modern obsession with scrubbing the dirt off everything.

Lewis stood with his back to the doors as he waited to cross the road. The traffic wasn't bad, but the cars were spaced at regular intervals and he couldn't find a gap to sprint across. Ahead of him was the police station. It couldn't have been more different to the Municipal Buildings if it tried. It had been built in the 1970s, and although probably in imminent danger of structural failure because of this, it was certainly a more welcoming sight than the building behind him. The red brick was kept to a minimum this time, and was broken by large strips of windows on each of the three floors. It was hideous as well, in its own way, but at least it didn't make Lewis think of one of Will's films. Because he could actually see through these windows, he could spot his destination already. Sergeant Keith Moon (presumably not named after the infamous pissed-up junkie pressure-cooker drummer from The Who, although it was

always fun to compare how dissimilar the namesakes were) was sitting at his desk by his window on the second floor, reading through the crime reports for the day, deciding which he would tell the local press and which he would keep to himself.

'Fuck it,' said Lewis, under his breath, and ran across the road, narrowly coming to a sticky end under the wheels of a brown Allegro being driven by an elderly gentleman in a cloth cap, which Lewis assumed, wrongly as it turned out, would be keeping well under the speed limit.

He kept his head down as the driver shouted a volley of impressive expletives after him.

Charming, thought Lewis as he hurried across the paved area in front of the police station towards the front door. On entering the reception area he was waved through by the bored-looking receptionist, who was dealing with an elderly woman who appeared to have lost her purse. Behind the desk, the receptionist, a podgy girl in a badly fitting uniform, pressed an unseen button and the lock for the door into the station clicked open. Lewis made his way up the stairs to Sgt Moon's office.

'How's it going, Keith?'

'You're late. How am I supposed to run a police station when I'm having to hang around waiting for idle reporters to get their arses out of bed?'

Lewis ignored the sergeant's comments. It didn't matter what time he turned up, he was always 'late'. And he knew that calling the sergeant 'Keith' really got on his nerves.

'Nothing for you today, I'm afraid. Looks like you've had a wasted journey.'

'Oh, never mind. At least I got to look at your smiling face. That'll keep me going all week. Surely someone must have had their bike nicked, or something? My editor's desperate.'

'Oh yes?'

Something about the sergeant's reaction to the word 'desperate' made Lewis's flesh crawl. He supposed Natalie might be seen as attractive to some men - he couldn't see it himself. Then again, he'd had more than his fair share of bollockings from her over the years. But she was just 31, and living with someone. This bloke in front of him was the wrong side of 50, pushing retirement, with what could only be described as a 'Friar Tuck' haircut and stomach to match. Lewis didn't want to know if he was married or not. By the looks of him, he'd never had a girlfriend in his life. When you added his looks to the kind of personality that can only be developed after 30 years of desk bound policing, you didn't exactly end up with the lead singer of Westlife.

Now he had the image of Sgt Moon shagging Natasha in his head, which to Lewis's eyes was somewhere near the sight of Bernard

Manning giving his sister one.

Thankfully, that delightful image was dispelled when a young police-woman stuck her head round the door of Moon's office and said: 'Sarge - we've got an incident over at Walton Road - house fire, possible persons trapped.'

Moon gave a sideways glance at Lewis, in an effort to explain that he didn't want the young reporter to know about this particular bit of news - not yet, anyway. But all he succeeded in doing was giving the impression he had developed a nervous tic.

'*Thank you*, Sophie.'

'Are you okay, Sarge? Anyway. The fire brigade are on their way, and I've diverted a couple of patrol cars over there. It's number 16. Initial reports suggest it might be arson…'

'Yes. THANK YOU Sophie. That will be all. Now, Lewis…'

But Lewis was already on his feet and putting his coat on as he headed out of the door. 'See you, *Sarge*.'

5.

As Lewis made his way back out of the police station, he pulled out his mobile phone and called the office. Walton Road was in the opposite direction, so it was a waste of time to report back there in person. A bored sounding Will answered the phone. 'Hi, it's me. Look Will, can you phone the fire brigade and find out what's going on at Walton Road? I'm on my way out there now. And can you get Elliot over there? It looks like Natalie's got her splash.'

'Okey-dokey.'

He hadn't expected Will to ask exactly what he had found out. Will's lack of interest in his chosen career could be quite astounding. How on earth he had kept his job as long as he had was a source of constant surprise to Lewis. The Elliot he had spoken about was The Clarion's freelance photographer - they couldn't afford to keep a staff man. Unfortunately this meant that the paper had to rely on his whims and whether he was going shopping with his mum that day, which could prove to be a problem when they had breaking stories like this. Just to be on the safe side, Lewis stopped off at a newsagents on the way and bought a throw-away camera. And a Mars bar, for energy.

As he made his way down the street he thought about what he was doing. There had been a fire, possibly started deliberately. That meant that someone was in the process of losing everything they had ever owned. Their entire life was going up in flames, and probably at the hands of some bastard they had never even met before. Also, there were 'persons trapped', so there was the chance that people were going to die. And that could mean a murder investigation. All in all, a good story for the paper. Both Lewis and Will had spent many a long hour in the pub trying to defend the job they did. But secretly they both knew that sometimes, it was pretty much indefensible. Like now. Basically what Lewis was about to do was trade in someone else's misery. This person, whoev-

er they were, was going through a life changing situation. And all Lewis could think about was that it would make a good story, and save him having to scramble around for another story to put on the front page of his crappy little free newspaper. The day ahead would involve interviews with the fire brigade, the police, neighbours, possibly even the family involved - if there was anyone left alive. It would be expected of him by Natalie - and if he was honest, he was looking forward to it more than a little bit. It was in his blood. But at the end of the day, the fact he had got all the information for his story wouldn't help the family get their house or their loved ones back. It was unlikely to help the police catch the arsonist. And long before the paper came out, the majority of people living in the town would have already heard the details through word of mouth. So what was the point? The point was, if Lewis wanted to keep his job and go on to better things, it was expected of him. And he enjoyed it, too. He wasn't a particularly nasty person, and could never see himself as one of those Fleet Street hacks you see on soap operas who get their foot in the door and start asking probing questions. But working on stories like this made him at least feel like he was dealing with the real world. Most of the time his work at the Clarion involved talking to councillors and re-writing press releases.

Up ahead, above the roofs of the terraced houses which made the bulk of the homes in this area, he could see a pall of black smoke rising into the clear blue autumn sky. A siren behind him signalled the imminent arrival of an emergency vehicle, and sure enough, seconds later a police Astra shot past him heading in the direction of the smoke, its blue lights going and its headlamps flashing in the way that only police cars' can. It was moving too quickly for him to register who was inside before it turned left into Walton Road, and Lewis idly wondered if it contained the bloated shape of Sgt Moon. It was unlikely, though. Nothing short of nuclear war would coax his fat arse out of that chair. Nuclear war or a free slap-up meal.

About a minute later, Lewis rounded the corner and entered Walton Road, a street which looked remarkably like the one he had left. This street, however, was full of emergency vehicles, flashing blue lights, uniforms, hoses and ladders. Not to mention hundreds of householders keen to watch one of their neighbours' homes burn down.

The source of the smoke was now obvious, despite the number of emergency vehicles between Lewis and it. A small, mid terraced house, unremarkable in every other way, was well ablaze. Fire fighters were attempting to keep it under control with water sprays, but were seeming to have little success. Flames were roaring from the downstairs windows, and thick black smoke was pouring out of the house through every opening. As Lewis watched, there was a shattering of glass and flames began

to lick from the larger of the two first floor windows.

Lewis knew better than to approach any of the fire fighters while they were busy, so made his way towards a young policeman who was standing between the crowd and the fire engines in an attempt to make sure no-one got too close. He didn't really need to bother, thought Lewis - the rising heat and eye-watering fumes were more than doing his job for him. Behind the bobby Lewis saw the first signs of flames from the house's chimney pot. There was going to be no saving this house - and the properties on either side would be lucky if they got away without any structural damage. The way these houses had been built meant that a fire could easily spread through the joining attics within minutes. In fact, it was entirely feasible that this fire could take out every home on that side of the entire street if the fire fighters didn't managed to contain it.

The smoke was getting worse, and Lewis's eyes were beginning to sting, but he walked the last few steps towards the young police officer, aware that he had crossed the psychological barrier between the crowd of now-worried residents and the emergency services. It was only a matter of a few metres of road space, but in stepping across he had stopped being 'one of the crowd' and become an object of interest. He could feel eyes boring into his back as people tried to work out who the fat bloke in the leather jacket was.

The police officer noticed his arrival and took a step towards him. 'I'm sorry, sir, but would you mind stepping back a few paces?'

'It's alright, mate - I'm with The Clarion.' Lewis fumbled for his battered press card and held it up in front of him. The police officer made a show of scrutinising it carefully.

'Okay, but you can't go any nearer. We've no idea what's inside that house. There could be an explosion at any moment.'

'A weapons store for international terrorists, eh?'

Lewis immediately regretted his flippancy. Not only was it probably not the time or the place for his own brand of crap humour - nothing ever happened in the town, and the chances of Al Qaeda livening it up by setting up home here were less than zero, unfortunately - but because he was the press, and this was a police officer, it was guaranteed that the joke would not be seen as a joke. In his experience, many police men and women seemed to have a humour bypass operation at training college, and when you added this to their general distrust of the press, you got an audience slightly less welcoming than that at the Glasgow Empire.

The officer screwed up his eyes and looked blankly back at this fat, scruffy slaphead who'd just sauntered up like he owned the place. 'No, sir - but there might be a gas boiler in there, or a kerosene bottle. Even aerosols can be dangerous when exposed to heat.'

Yes, I know you patronising tosser, thought Lewis, but he kept smil-

ing. The policeman was young, most likely younger than him, and had probably only been in the job a few months. However, he seemed quite willing to talk to the press, which was a bonus.

'So, what's going on?'

'Well, the fire lads have been pouring on the water to try and stop the fire spreading to the other properties - at the moment they don't know how it started, but a team are about to go in and check.'

The policeman turned to look towards the fire, and Lewis took the opportunity to shuffle up next to him. The water seemed to be having some effect on the upstairs, but smoke and flames were still pouring through the bay window which was the only window on the ground floor. As they watched, three fire fighters in full flame proof suits ran towards the house, pushed open the front door and disappeared inside, two thick brown hoses snaking after them.

'They're looking for survivors, although I wouldn't give them much hope,' said the young policeman, not taking his eyes off the blaze. 'We believe the house is owned by an elderly gentleman, who lives there with his wife.'

A gust of wind blew the smoke down into the street, taking the police, fire fighters and sightseers by surprise. Within seconds the entire street was full of coughing, gasping people. Lewis's eyes were streaming, and he couldn't see a thing. Behind him he could hear coughing and retching. Children crying. As Lewis tried to wipe clean his eyes with the sleeve of his coat, a loud roar burst from the house and he was knocked off his feet by a blast of searing hot air. There was a scream, and the sound of running and shouting from in front of him. He stood up and rubbed his eyes, opening them despite the pain to try and see what was going on. The scene in front of him swum in and out of focus, and he could feel tears running down his face. Luckily the smoke had just got in his eyes, and he hadn't breathed any in. Somewhere nearby he could hear the sound of the police officer retching. He must have breathed in a lung full of the stuff.

The shapes and colours he was looking at began to solidify, and Lewis started to make out what was going on. The fire was burning even more fiercely than before on the ground floor of the house. Flames were now leaping out of the front door as well as the bay window. There must have been a blow back of some kind. Perhaps the old codger was keeping ammunition in his cellar after all, he thought grimly. Most of the activity wasn't centred around the house, though, although the hoses were still trained on the burning building.

Fire fighters were clustered around some burning rags which must have been thrown from the house by the explosion, and a team of paramedics were making their way through the parked vehicles and tangled hoses scattered across the road, carrying a stretcher. Lewis' vision cleared

for a moment, and he saw one of the fire fighters attempt to lift one end of the still smouldering pile of rags. With a start, Lewis realised that the rags were actually what was left of a fire fighters' uniform, and inside it was the blackened remains of its owner.

Shit! Where was Elliot when you needed him? Lewis cursed under his breath, then remembered the camera he had bought on the way. He fumbled in his jacket pocket for it, stripped off the protective plastic coating, and started snapping away. The paramedics had arrived by the side of the badly burned man, and were attempting some kind of CPR on him. He saw a look of concern pass between the green boiler-suited man and woman team through the camera's viewfinder, then they rolled the prostrate fire fighter onto the stretcher and carried it quickly back to their ambulance.

Lewis realised that the injured man must have been one of the three who went into the house. Although blackened and burned, he recognised the supposed fire proof uniform he had seen enter the house just seconds ago. But he couldn't see any sign of the other two men who had gone in. In the continuing absence of his supposed photographer, Lewis started snapping away at the source of the action, the house. The fire fighters' worst fears had now been realised, and the flames had now spread to the house on the left, where they were licking from the rafters of that roof.

6.

God, I wish I was dead.

Will had been sat on the same uncomfortable chair for just over an hour, but it felt more like 10. He had tried shifting from one cheek to the other, leaning forward with elbows on the desk, hands supporting chin, leaning back with the chair slightly tilted, arms stretched out as far as they could go. These positions and a million variants. But his arse had still managed to go to sleep, and he had the horrible feeling that when he tried to get up, if he ever was allowed to leave this hell-hole, a vicious attack of pins and needles in his feet would send him crashing to the ground immediately.

His shorthand pad sat on the rickety old desk in front of him, blank except for the words 'Council meeting' and the date scrawled at the top of the page, and a small doodle of a cartoon Will hanging himself at the bottom.

No-one who hasn't sampled the thrill of democracy at its most grass roots level - the town council meeting - can possibly understand the pain of sitting for hours on end in a draughty committee room listening to a bunch of old farts talking about drains in infinite detail, he thought. At the moment he felt quite alert, but he knew it wouldn't last. Year after year of doing the same, pointless thing had schooled him well. Despite feeling wide awake and able to go on all afternoon now, within the space of about ten minutes he would hardly be able to keep his eyes open. They must pump sleeping gas through the vents of the antique air conditioning system. The fact was, he couldn't go to sleep, and his mind knew that. So with some kind of perverse glee it usually started to shut itself down about half way through the average meeting. What he wouldn't give for a pair of those glasses you used to see the children using in The Beano. The ones which had eyes painted on the lenses to make the Bash Street Kids look like they were still awake and listening to Teacher when they

were all actually having a crafty snooze. Come to think of it, how come Teacher's wife had looked exactly the same as him, right down to the moustache? Had he married his sister? Or was it his brother in a dress? What exactly was going on behind the closed doors and net curtains of Bash Street? That Plug was definitely the product of kissing cousins somewhere along the line, and as for the really stupid one - what was his name? Ah, yes. Smiffy. Perhaps the school was next door to a nuclear waste dump, or something. Perhaps Bash Street was where Saddam Hussein had hidden his weapons of mass destruction…

Ah, shit. This was the other thing his mind did to make council meetings a waking nightmare. Most people day dreamed, their minds wandering off for five minutes. Will's packed up a picnic, put the kids in the back seat of the Volvo and set off for the cross-channel ferry and a fortnight in France.

He had to *concentrate*. Any second now, one of these senile old bastards might say something interesting. There always had to be a first time. And if he went back to the office with nothing, again, Natalie would have his guts for garters. He looked up from the blank page of his pad to see if anything had changed radically. Nope. Councillor Jim Boggitt was still standing and addressing his colleagues on the drainage problems around Upper East Street. Well, the residents of Upper East Street could stick their backed up bogs up their arses, as far as Will was concerned. Which, he conceded, was probably what was happening, in a manner of speaking. He looked around at the other councillors. Half of them *were* asleep, the lucky sods. The meeting was being held, as always, in the faded elegance of the grandly titled Council Chamber. It was basically a large, square room directly in the centre of the Municipal Buildings, with a huge, and Will would have to grudgingly admit, quite spectacular, domed ceiling in the centre, set into which were Victorian stained glass windows. Directly below the dome was the circular council table, around which sat the 20 or so council members in attendance. Directly in front of Will's press bench, but on the opposite side of the table, sat the chairman and Council Leader, William Prendergast. He was a tall, thin man, smartly turned out in a grey suit, with short white hair slicked back from his high, domed forehead and large, bushy grey eyebrows. On his left sat the clerk, a girl in a rather 80s bright red power suit about the same age as Will, who looked nearly as bored as him, too. On his right sat the council's Chief Executive, Martin Brush, another smartly turned out middle aged man. He was a bit thicker set than Prendergast, wearing a darker suit and a brighter tie. His hair was dark, although probably dyed, and there was more of it than on Prendergast's balding pate. Despite what anyone said about the council being a democracy, these two held the real power. Will knew that they both were aware of the strength of media

manipulation in this age of spin doctors and New Labour, and both had backgrounds in big business. Although Prendergast was supposed to be an elected representative, he spent nearly as much time in the Council Offices as Brush, who was paid taxpayers money to be there. And everyone knew that Prendergast was making a tidy sum from his position.

Still Boggitt droned on. Behind Will and to his right was the public gallery, a small ante chamber blocked off from the rest of the room by a low wall, from which interested members of the public could see and see the cut and thrust of debate first hand. As usual there was no-one there, except, of course, for Frank. Frank was always at every meeting. A dedication to the council which neither Will or Lewis, or their predecessors at The Clarion had ever been able to fathom. Frank was no a member of the council, nor had he ever worked for it. He was at least 80 years old, but still bright and intelligent, with a mind like a steel trap lurking underneath a quite ridiculous comb over. At some point in his dim past he had served with the army, but had also been a committed member of the Communist party. He wasn't married, as far as either of the young reporters knew. They had, on one of their lengthy boring Thursday afternoons, long after the paper had gone to bed, decided that Frank had a 19-year-old busty blonde stunna as a girlfriend, who never left the house and spent the days cleaning, cooking and making exciting underwear, and the nights acting out Frank's wildest fantasies in the bedroom. But looking at Frank now, sitting there hanging on every one of Councillor Boggitt's words, Will had to admit that this was probably more than a bit unlikely. Frank spent his days wandering around the town, dressed in brown suit, thick V-neck jumper, hideously unfashionable shirt and tie, and brown flasher's Mac, whatever the weather. He always carried an old Safeway bag stuffed full of council agendas and photocopied documents from the town library. When he wasn't a-wandering or in the library, he could be found here, in the Municipal Buildings, sitting in on council meetings or standing in front of one of the many notice boards scattered around the foyer, checking out forthcoming planning applications or new policies. His skin was brown and weather beaten, and a pair of enormous bottle-bottomed glasses were perched on the end of his hooked, beak-like nose. As Will looked over at him, Frank turned and caught his eye, then pointed at him, following that with a complicated hands-and-face routine which Will took to mean that Frank wanted a word with the young reporter after the meeting. Will stuck his thumb up at Frank and smiled, then looked away, grimacing. Frank always wanted a word with the reporters after the meetings. He and his friend Harold were always concocting wild stories of cases of mismanagement and maladministration within the council. Normally, Will knew, with more than a grain of truth, but the problem was proving their wild claims. Reporters new to the area soon learnt to

listen to what Frank and Harold had to say, then forget about it. No-one on a tiny local paper like theirs had the time or the inclination to go ferreting about looking for clues which may or may not lead to the resignation of some poor old sod who'd used his position to make sure his cousin had planning permission for their conservatory passed without too much trouble.

Will's worries were confirmed - he *did* drop off during the meeting. In more ways than one, in fact. Half way through Councillor Jeff Slattard's reply to Councillor Boggitt's half hour monologue on the drains, Will had slipped into dreamland and woken up as he fell sideways off his chair. As he picked himself up off the carpet and sat back down again, he was given a cheery round of applause by the councillors. At the end of the meeting, which had been reasonable short at only two hours, he hurried out, glad to get away from the funny looks. Oh, they'd be talking about *that* one for months. In his hurry to leave, he'd completely forgotten about Frank, and has he made his way down the ornate curved marble staircase that led from the chamber to the front doors of the building, he heard the pensioner's voice calling after him.

'Hey! Hold up - I want a word with you.'

Will, his patience severely tested, stopped half way down the staircase and turned to see Frank making his way down after him, coat over one arm, plastic bag rustling in the other. 'What is it, Frank? I'm in a bit of a hurry.'

'So I see. Not stopping for the tea and biscuits, even?'

'No. I just want to get back to the office. Nat's expecting me to file the copy from the meeting as soon as.'

'Ah, forget about all that bollocks. I might have something much better for you.'

Frank tapped the side of his nose with his finger and then started rummaging in his bag. 'It's in here somewhere…'

Will looked around and started tapping his feet. Councillors holding cups of after meeting tea were congregating on the landing above, looking down at Will and his rustling friend. One of them nudged his neighbour, and said something. The pair started to laugh. Will knew they were talking about his trick with the chair.

'Frank, can we continue this conversation outside?'

Frank looked up from his bag. 'Oh, yes. Of course we can. Made a bit of a tit of yourself in there, didn't you?'

8.

'No, I can't find it. That wasn't what I wanted to speak to you about, anyway.'

Frank stopped rummaging through his plastic bag and placed it on the floor by his feet.

Will stopped himself from swearing. The pair had made their way out of the building and were sitting across the road from it, on one of the park benches in front of the police station. In front of them, the red brick of the council building was glowing in the late afternoon sun. Will wanted to get back to the office. He had got a few nuggets from the meeting, and he wanted to see what Lewis had found out about the fire this morning. His friend had come back into the office quite excited. Not only had the two householders died, but so had one of the firemen, and two others were in a critical state. Apparently there had been some kind of a blowback as they entered the house. But the best thing was, they had even got photos. Elliot hadn't turned up of course, the lazy wanker, but Lewis had used up a whole roll of film, which even now was being developed at Boots. It was almost like working for a proper newspaper.

Still, at least Frank was here to bring him crashing back down to earth following this morning's excitement. He looked at the little, wizened old man, wondering if that was what he was going to end up like. Cursed to walk the streets of the town for the rest of his days, getting his jollies from council meetings and engaging in conversation with people who didn't want to speak to him. Come to think of it, that was what he was doing now! Still, at least he was being paid for it - unlike sad Frank.

'Come on then, Frank, spit it out.'

'Well,' a look of concern passed over the old man's kind features. 'I was going to wait until Harold got here - but I haven't seen him all day. We were supposed to meet up this morning in the library, but he never turned up. Most unlike him.'

Will nodded. He knew Harold - not as well as Frank, because Harold was less vocal, but the pair of them were well known around the town as a couple. They would spend hours together in the library, reading the day's papers, going back through the archives and talking about the old days. They had similar views on the current council, and both reckoned it was rotten to the core. But so was any council, these days, to one extent or the other - as far as Will was concerned, anyway.

'He's probably not very well. None of us are getting any younger, you know.'

Will nodded again. Although in Frank and Harold's case, they didn't seem to be getting any older, either. Both of them had reached that age where their skin couldn't get any more wrinkled, their heads couldn't get any more bald, they couldn't lose any more teeth - basically, they would just keep going now until they died.

'Still. We've been looking into the affairs of the council…'

Oh no. That was what Will had been afraid of. Another half baked cock-and-bull story. Shit. He'd be here all afternoon, now.

'…as you probably already know. There's a lot more than meets the eye there, you know. Harold said he'd come up with something that would blow them all out of the water. Dynamite, he said. We'd already found some stuff out, but last night he phoned to tell me he'd carried on looking through some old archives in the library after I left yesterday, and discovered something amazing.'

'Hang on a minute, Frank. *Old* archives? What's that got to do with *this* council?'

'Ah ha. *Exactly*.'

Frank looked knowingly at Will, and tapped the side of his nose again. Will looked confused at Frank, and mentally made a circular motion to the side of his head with his finger. That was it. The pair of them had finally tipped over the edge. Cuck-oo.

'When you say old, how old exactly? Last year old?'

'No, of course not. We know what happened last year. I'm talking about 1893. The year *that* place,' Frank pointed at the council offices in front of them, 'was built.'

'Well, what's that got to do with me?' Will was getting exasperated. The old fool had finally lost the plot, and Will wasn't really interested in listening to his demented ramblings.

'If me and Harold are right, more than you could ever imagine,' Frank answered, curtly. 'I know you lot at The Clarion think we're a pair of old idiots with too much time on our hands. But this is *important*. That lot at the council are mixed up in things that make my hair curl, what's left of it… and like it or not, it needs to be investigated. In my day, newspapers were there to tell the people what was going on, not sensationalise

the trivial. This could be the most important story you ever work on.'

Will bristled a bit at the 'sensational' jibe. The Clarion prided itself on being a community newspaper, and there was no way Natalie or her predecessors would ever let anything remotely sensational into it. The whole idea was to report the facts as they happened, not take a non-story and spin it into something else. Bloody hell, he wished he could, but there was no chance.

'Now, look Frank…'

But Frank had hit his stride, and wasn't going to let Will get a word in edgewise. His voice was getting louder, too.

'Now you might think that you can walk away from this conversation and pretend it never happened, like that business over Smithson's expenses, or Wallwhite's trip to Barcelona thanks to the tax payer.'

'Now you know as well I as I do that the council disproved both those theories, Frank…'

'Whitewashed over them, more like. That bloody editor of yours doesn't want to upset the apple cart, that's her problem. Anyway, this is bigger than anything I've told you before, and once I've spoken to Harold this evening, we'll give you a story that you'll have to print.'

Will had had enough. He got up off the bench and stood in front of Frank. 'Okay then, Frank. I'll tell you what. You give me the evidence you say the pair of you have sorted out, and I *promise* I'll look into it. I don't want this council to carry on conning the public any more than you do. After all, I live in this town, don't I? I pay my Council Tax just like every other person. You have a word with Harold, and I'll see you tomorrow.'

Will walked off, feeling slightly annoyed with himself for losing his temper with Frank. After all, he was just a harmless old man, and his heart was in the right place. As he reached the corner of one of the high street shops, he looked back towards the bench. Frank was still sitting there, rummaging through his plastic bag.

9.

Will arrived back at The Clarion five minutes later to a flustered looking Natalie and a still excited Lewis. Sharon, cool and unconcerned with the day-to-day running of the office, as usual, was busy typing in a rugby report. Lewis was on the phone, but looked up as Will walked in through the fire exit, and gave him the thumbs-up. Natalie had eschewed her glass-panelled office, and was sitting on the edge of Will's desk, obviously waiting to talk to Lewis. Will couldn't help noticing that the way she was sitting showed perhaps more leg than she would have preferred him to see. Still, that was the bonus of those short pencil skirts that empowered women like Natalie wore, and all power to them, he thought. She was flicking through a copy of FHM that he had left on his desk.

'This magazine is just a glorified porno mag.'

'Unfortunately, it's not that interesting. What's going on?'

Natalie put the magazine down and indicated his partner, who was still in heated discussion on the phone. 'That fire that Lewis went out on this morning. The house was Harold Barnes's.'

It took a second for the name to filter through to Will's brain. Then he felt himself go pale.

'Shit. I was just talking to Frank about him. Aw, no.'

'The fire brigade still have no idea what happened there. The place is completely gutted. Also, another fireman has died since this morning, and the third isn't looking too good.'

Will was still reeling from the news about Harold. He hardly knew the guy, but usually the deaths he dealt with from day to day were people he had never even set eyes on. It brought it home that they were dealing with real people with real families when something like this happened. 'So, Harold and his wife… it was them who died in the blaze? Shit. Poor Frank. He doesn't know anything about it. Him and Harold were like best mates. And I was just a bit of a bastard to him, as well.'

'Well,' said Natalie, matter-of-factly, 'this means we've got a front page story, and page two and three leads as well. Lewis is going to need a hand, so when he gets off the phone get him to fill you in.'

Fuck, thought Will. That meant a death knock. At least one, possibly two. Death knocks were the worst part of his job. The phrase was as nasty as it sounded. It meant cold calling on the grieving relatives, knocking on their front doors and then apologising for being alive whilst at the same time trying to exact as much information out of them about their loved ones as possible. Hopefully, Harold wouldn't have any family, then Will could at least minimise the situation by speaking to friends and neighbours. Like Frank. Oh, that would be fun.

Lewis put the phone down and let out a long breath. 'Wow.'

Natalie stood up and turned to face Lewis. 'What did the police say?'

'Well, they can't find anything that makes them think it's arson, but at the same time they haven't found any *accidental* cause, either. Luckily, most of the fire was contained in the one house, so apart from some damage to next door's roof and a bit of smoke damage, everyone else is okay. Harold and his wife were found in the front room, which is also where the fire started. Apparently, the bodies were in a bad way. They've been taken away for forensic examination. Neither the police or the fire brigade have any idea what caused the second explosion which killed the two fire fighters. By all accounts, it shouldn't have happened at all. There was no store of flammable materials, and although the house does have a gas supply, only the cooker is connected up to it, and the fire never reached the kitchen. Bizarre. Anyway, that's for the fire investigation team to look into. Apparently we're going to get some kind of official statement from the fire brigade about the death of the two men, and the injuries to the third. Luckily, it looks like he's going to pull through. Horrific burns, though.'

'Fuck me,' said Will under his breath, which earned him a stern look from his boss.

'Maybe later,' Lewis replied.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Lewis and Will shared the death knocks, and they went surprisingly well. It turned out that the only family Harold had was his son, who lived with his wife in London. They were travelling up the next day to identify the body, but Lewis managed to find out their telephone number and had a lengthy conversation with the daughter-in-law about the dead couple. The son was too distraught to speak to him. The families of both the firemen were even more keen to talk. Their sons and husbands were heroes, after all, and although upset, they took some consolation at the thought their names would live on in print, although only briefly. Today's news is still very much tomorrow's chip wrapping, especially when it's in a free newspaper that comes

through people's doors whether they want it or not.

There was just one blight on an otherwise fruitful day. Neither reporter could track down Frank. He didn't get in touch, despite the fact that he must have heard about the death by the end of the day, after all, it was all round the town by about four o' clock. But no-one was answering the phone or the door at Frank's house, and the place looked deserted - which put paid to the idea about the Girls Aloud look-alike girlfriend.

At six o' clock, official knocking off time on a Monday, a very weary editorial crew locked up the office and went to their respective homes, still not having tracked down the wayward Frank. Tired but happy, all four of them considered they had done more than their fair share of work for the hungry readership of The Clarion, still with another day to go until deadline. They had dealt with more news in one day than during the past year. Surely nothing else could happen before the paper went to bed tomorrow?